

LED BY THE SPIRIT

*THE LIFE AND WORK OF
CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES*

founder of
THE CONGREGATION OF
THE HOLY SPIRIT



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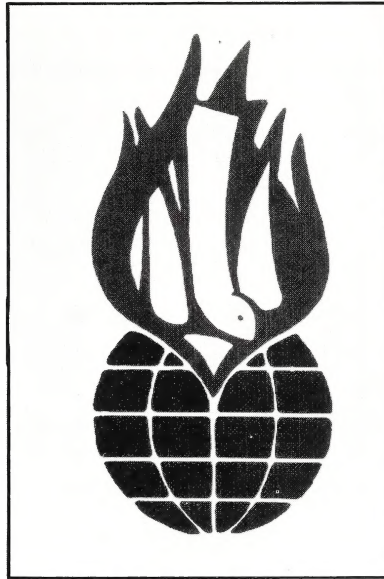
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PURIFY, O LORD, OUR HEARTS AND OUR BODIES SO THAT WITH OUR WHOLE BEING RENEWED OUR HEARTS MAY BE EVER INTENT ON DOING YOUR WILL AND WE BE FOUND PLEASING TO YOU.

(Rule No. 40)

I WOULD BE ONLY TOO HAPPY IF, HAVING SET THE WORLD ON FIRE WITH THE LOVE OF GOD, I COULD HAVE SHED THE LAST DROP OF MY BLOOD FOR HIM WHOSE BLESSINGS WERE EVER BEFORE MY EYES.

(Reflections on the Past).



Acknowledgements


During the years this work has been in hand, many people have helped – more indeed than I can now recall. There were those in France who put me in contact with the sources – the written word and the relevant sites. I wish to thank Fr. Joseph Carrard and Fr. Henri Littner, the archivists at the General Archives at Chevilly, Paris, as well as Fr. Maurice Gobeil at the Generalate in Rome. Several of my confrères at Blackrock have helped generously with proof-reading and valued suggestions. Fr Joe Fullen was ever ready to help with his expertise in French. To one and all I gratefully record my indebtedness.

Two people deserve a special mention. This work leans heavily on the original research done by Père Joseph Michel, and his continued generous assistance over a long period has been invaluable to one not quite *au fait* with the language and the history of France in the age of Louis XIV. Finally I gladly put on record my deep indebtedness to my confrère, Br. Paul, who not merely typed the complete manuscript but patiently included all the interminable additions and corrections.

This work then is no mere solo effort but a communal tribute to a worthy but often forgotten Founder.

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Preface

1989 saw the first official steps being taken in Paris to introduce the cause for the beatification of Claude Francis Poullart des Places, 1679-1709, founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Those well acquainted with the man and his work rejoiced. Apart from being convinced of the heroicity of his virtue there is the presumption that the founder of a society which was to play a notable role in the Kingdom would have been accorded a special charism to accomplish his work. A study of the life of des Places confirms this presumption.

Some people, however, may still have misgivings. They might argue that there is a lack of convincing evidence about des Places, that he had not had the opportunity to develop his work fully, and that, in fact, the Venerable Libermann, 1802-1852, was the effective founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

Certainly there has been relatively little available on des Places in English. Prior to 1958 there was scarcely anything. Then for the first time his writings were published in the USA by Fr. Henry Koren together with a brief biography. This heralded a new era in the appreciation of this charismatic young Frenchman among English readers.

Since 1976 *Spiritan Papers*, issued from the Spiritan Generalate, have periodically dealt with aspects of the life and charism of des Places, but a comprehensive biography in English remained still a desideratum. And so des Places remained a shadowy figure even for many members of his own society. It is hoped that this work will fill that lacuna. Apart from providing a biography, it aims at being a resource book in that a generous selection of relevant passages from original documents has been incorporated into the narrative.

A personal note. In 1958, when I was commencing my researches at the General Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in Paris, Père Cabon, the noted authority on Libermann, took me along to see the former seminary where des Places had died in 1709. He suggested that I should undertake the work of making him better known in Ireland. It was not feasible at the time to undertake that work. Twenty years later, when travelling through Rennes with a confrere, our car broke down badly at a spot that transpired to be the centre of des Places' world during his formative years. The enforced delay gave us ample opportunity to retrace des Places' footsteps. We were then pleasantly surprised to discover that the following year we should be celebrating the third centenary of his birth. The results of our pilgrimage to des Places' birthplace were duly published in *Spiritan Papers* no. 8. Another ten years, however, were to slip by without any serious effort to complete the des Places story. Then came two events in 1989: the provincial of the French Province, Père Savoie, acting on the directives of the General Chapter, made the first moves to introduce the cause of des Places for beatification; I received a call from South Africa to conduct the annual retreat for the Spiritan confreres taking as the theme, the life and charism of the founder! Both these events provided the necessary push to get on with the job suggested by Père Cabon in 1958. I thank God that I was provided with the motivation and the leisure to immerse myself in the life and work of des Places. I found it eminently rewarding. It is my fervent prayer that the reader will share my conviction.

Finally, though written primarily with the Spiritan family in view, it is hoped that this work will be of interest to a wider audience.

Seán Farragher, C.S.Sp.

Early Years

1679-1688

FAMILY BACKGROUND

There are many remarkable things about the life of Claude Francis Poullart des Places. That he launched his great project at the age of twenty four must make him qualify for the title of the youngest founder of a major religious society in the church. That his project survived his premature death at the age of thirty was little short of a miracle considering the odds stacked against it. But that he should have started such a work in the first instance was so totally at variance with his origins and upbringing one is compelled to ask what caused him to turn his back on status and wealth to embrace poverty and a life in the service of the poor. He owed so much to his good parents and yet his outlook and life was a rejection of so much that they valued so highly.

Claude's father, François Claude Poullart des Places, was born at Bréhand-Montcontour some 15 miles from St. Brieuc in Brittany. He was the last representative of a family once distinguished by its noble title, its marriage alliances, and by the fact that one of its members, William Poullart, had been Bishop of Rennes and St. Malo, in the second half of the XIVth century.

In more recent times the family's fortunes had declined and when the nobility in Brittany was subjected to a reorganisation with a view to raising funds for the royal treasury, under Colbert in 1668, François Claude had reluctantly to forego his claim to noble status, due to his inability to produce the required titled deeds. But he was pledged to recover the status of nobility for the family if the Lord blessed him with a male heir. In the meantime he set about re-building the family fortunes.¹

François Claude studied Law and qualified as *avocat*, or barrister at the *Parlement de Bretagne*. He combined a remarkable business acumen with a brilliant command of legal knowledge and competence. These talents he used to conduct his own affairs but he also put them at the disposal of the leading bankers of Rennes, Ferret du Tymeur and Michel de Montaran. In token of appreciation for services rendered he was entrusted with the collecting of all the temporal revenues of the great Benedictine abbeys of Saint-Melaine and St. George. This happened just a few weeks before his marriage 27 May 1677 to Jeanne Le Meneust, a wedding gift doubtless! François was also responsible for the collecting of the revenue for the abbey of Saint-Sauveur at Redon, for the priories of St. Croix de Chateaugiron, of St. Nicholas de Montfort of Pléchatel, and he was responsible for the collecting of the revenues due to the Archbishop of Rennes. This work embraced collecting the tithes, allocating the farm lands of the monks and even involved the overseeing of the maintenance of buildings of some of these big religious houses. Of course, he collected his professional fees in each case! Though he specialised in farming ecclesiastical revenues he was also deeply involved in the collecting of tolls and tariffs for the farm produce of various regions in Brittany. As well as the work of farming taxes and tolls he found time and taste for getting involved directly in the wholesale trade in grain, cattle and textiles. Besides all this commercial activity he engaged in the purchase of property, land and houses in Rennes, and throughout the neighbouring towns and countryside. One of the houses acquired in the early period was La Maison Noble des Mottais, the rent from which was to be his son's *titulus clericalis*, the

guarantee of temporal means of support which was demanded of everyone before being allowed to proceed to major orders.

All this property and commerce should have been subject to heavy taxation in those days when Colbert fincombed the taxable resources of the realm with a heavy hand to cope with the royal expenditure in matters of conducting wars, building palaces, etc., but even here the uncanny genius of Mr. des Places had all planned. He secured the post of *Juge-Garde des Monnaies*, Legal-custodian of the Mint, a post which in itself carried no salary but which exempted the holder from taxation as well as conferring on him many of the trappings of nobility. That post was secured in 1685 when his son Claude was already six years of age and by that time the course of his career was being carefully plotted so as to ensure that he bring back to the family the full status of nobility.

That François Claude was in his 37th year when he married was not entirely due to the fact that he was so much immersed in his legal and commercial interests. His marriage was postponed for several years because of his fiancée's deep commitment to a family where she was a devoted and treasured governess, a family whose friendship and support meant much to Mr. des Places because, apart from its distinguished noble status, its head, Le Comte de Marbeuf, was *président à mortier* of the Parlement de Bretagne. The governess and fiancée in question, Jeanne Le Meneust, belonged to a long established family of St. Leonard de Fougères, a town some 30 miles from Rennes on the road to Paris. Her father, Gilles Le Meneust de la Vieuxville, was collector of fouages (house and fire tax) in the Baronies of Fougères and Antrain. It would appear, however, that he was a native of Nantes. He had died young and in the words of a chronicler "he left his daughter nothing apart from a good education". This education stood her in good stead when her friend, one Nicolle Lyais, also from Fougères, who became Marquise de Marbeuf, recommended her as governess to her sister-in-law, the wife of Le Comte de Marbeuf, President of the Parlement de Bretagne.

For the next nine years Jeanne was to live a busy life in caring for the Marbeuf family at the Hôtel de Marbeuf in Rennes and at their various chateaux at Laille, at Gue and at Servon. She became very much the heart and head of this family, especially after the mother died in 1674. She was so much a part of the family that she was chosen in preference to many of the titled relatives as sponsor in baptism to their second daughter, named Jeanne – Claude. By that date already, 1668, Jeanne Le Meneust and François Claude des Places were well known to each other as their names appear in a parish register as sponsors at the baptism of a friend's child. They may well have been even then intent on marriage but Jeanne's deep commitment to the Marbeuf family prevailed on her to put off her own marriage. When the mother, Louise Gabrielle, died, Jeanne took over the complete care and education of the family, calling on her cousin, l'Abbé Pierre Cheux de la Maisonneuve, to act as tutor even though by that time he had been appointed a pastor. Even after Le Comte de Marbeuf had remarried she remained on for a year to smooth the take-over by the new woman in the lives and affection of the younger members of the family.

During all these years of patient waiting François Claude des Places was, as we have seen, busily engaged in extending his legal practice and in amassing a huge fortune. He also acquired apartments in the vicinity of l'Hôtel de Marbeuf 'beside the ancient Gate of St. George'.

The marriage ceremony eventually took place far away, however, in the parish of Servon-sur-Vilaine, the explanation being, of course, the presence of Jeanne in the Marbeuf chateau there at the time. The marriage ceremony was performed by her cousin, l'Abbé Pierre Cheux, in the presence of the Marbeuf family and

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Claude Jean
poullart

Claude François né du Jean Thiers
fidèle n. h. Claude François Poullart
ad. de la cour de St. Pierre et St. Paul
La Compagnie des Prêtres des Plaines
de cette paroisse en l'acte de son baptême
Où Julien Roussigneul, Abbé de St. Pierre et
Jean Louis de St. François, Baptême par
haut et puissant Seigneur Antoine Claude
Des Maubert Chancelier Laïque de
Lectice, duquel et arch. de St. Pierre
Die Roy en ses Conseils et par son
Parlement de Bretagne, par son
Commandement François, Evêque
d'Amboise et de St. Pierre, les quels ont
signé ce jour vingt et septième de
l'année mil six cent soixante et dix
Né et avec plusieurs autres personnes de qualité

P. C. Maubert François de St. Pierre
De Maubert Roussigneul
Marie le Gouverneur
François de St. Pierre
Gillette de St. Pierre

J. B. Roussigneul
R. d. S. 9

Certificate of Claude's baptism in St. Peter's Church attached to St. George's Abbey

their many friends. François Claude inserted in the marriage deed the following significant words: "According to the said Poullart, Mr des Places, he declares that he neither renounces nor claims the title of nobility held by his ancestors, until he has recovered his title deeds".²

BIRTHS AND BAPTISMS

François Claude and Jeanne having put off their marriage were now both approaching the 40 years mark. For a time it was feared there would be no family. They prayed the Lord to bless them with a child. After two years a child was born, a son. Needless to say they were thrilled. So were their neighbours and friends, the Marbeufs. Next day the child was brought to the nearby abbey church of St. Peter at St. George's to be baptised. Luckily the baptismal certificate has survived in spite of the great fire of Rennes, 1720. The document is bristling with noble titles and provides a fitting overture to the scenario being planned for him. We quote:

Claude Francis, born yesterday, the son of nobleman Claude Francis Poullart, lawyer at the Court, and Madame Jeanne Le Meneust, his spouse, Lord and Lady des Places, has been baptized in this church by the noble and illustrious Sir Julian Roussigneul, its Rector. He was held over the holy baptismal font by the exalted and puissant Lord, Sir Claude de Marbeuf, Lord of Laille, Gué and other places, member of the King's Council, President of his Parliament in Brittany, Godfather; and Madame Françoise Truillot, Lady of Ferret, Godmother, who together with several other persons of quality have affixed their signatures this day, February the twenty-seventh, 1679.

(signed) Claude de Marbeuf (President of the Parliament
Françoise Truillot (Lady of Ferret)

(Claude) de Marbeuf (Abbot of Langonnet)

F.Thounenin, Marie Le Gouverneur, François Goyuon de Beaucorps,
Gillette Lexot, Ferret, J. Goussigneul, Rector of St. George's.³

His sponsors then were none other than the Comte Claude de Marbeuf himself, president of the Parlement de Bretagne, and Françoise Truillot, daughter of an attorney of the Parlement de Bretagne. Françoise was a friend of the famous writer, Madame de Sévigné, and had married Barthélemy Ferret, des Places' banker friend. Her two brothers-in-law, the Reverend Canons Ferrets, were to have a determining role in Claude's choice of vocation in later years. But for the moment the spotlight is more on his godfather after whom he is named Claude, and Francis, of course, after his father.⁴

Where precisely the des Places house was at this period cannot be pinpointed. There are three indications given to guide us, namely, "near the Abbey of St. George"; "very close to the St. George's Gate"; "near the Hôtel de Marbeuf". All these three landmarks are, of course, in the same general area, clearly marked on the old maps of Rennes and close by the old town wall, St. George's Gate being one of the main gates to the city through this protecting wall. The Hôtel Marbeuf was actually outside the city wall on the east side. This mansion, which must have been well known to Claude, still exists.⁵ It is likely that the des Places' home was within the walls in what was known as Place Saint-Georges, the introduction, as it were, to rue Saint Georges, the prestige street of Rennes, in fact of Brittany, as it leads on to the Palace of the Parlement de Bretagne. This whole area was known as 'The Street of Robes' because it was the preserve of those who were entitled to wear

robes of office or the costumes of the nobility. The area was known as the parish of St. Peter at St. George's, a separate parish in those days. The Saint Georges referred to was an ancient abbey of Benedictine nuns. This abbey had acquired centuries previously the revenues, etc. of the St. Peter's Church on condition that they undertook responsibility for the pastoral care attached. This called for the building of an extra chapel at the abbey which catered for the public, the pastor in charge being in the pay, as it were, of the abbey. It was in this beautiful old church – no longer extant, that Claude was baptised and it is there that he attended his first church services.⁶

His parents, mindful of their fervent prayers to the Lord for a child, dedicated him to Our Lady and had him dressed in white 'till the age of seven' as a reminder to himself and to all that he was so dedicated.⁷ What effect this had on the growing boy we can only guess, but it is certain that Claude from a very early age had a deep personal devotion to Our Lady, as had his mother and indeed his godfather. Le Comte de Marbeuf is on record as having bequeathed funds as a foundation in perpetuity for masses to be said in honour of Our Lady of the Rosary, with the expressed hope that a confraternity of the Holy Rosary be established in that church. And Claude's father is on record as being a very active member of the Sodality of Our Lady of the Purification, at the Jesuit College, in his later years. Finally when Claude's mother made over part of her estate to St. Meen's hospice for the poor she stipulated that the chaplains should recite the rosary with the inmates three times a week.⁸

Little is known of the early years of Claude's life. The next event registered in the des Places family record is the birth of a daughter 20 August 1680. We learn from her baptismal certificate that the baptism took place in the family home. This indicates that she must have been delicate from birth. The solemnising of the baptism took place later at the Church of St. Peter's at St. George where she was officially named Jeanne-Claude. Her sponsors were Claude (junior) de Marbeuf and his wife. One notices that the close link with the Marbeufs is maintained and also that the same Christian name seems to crop up ever so often. The joy at the presence of a girl in the family was short-lived as Jeanne Claude died at the age of five months: so it is unlikely that Claude had any memories of this sister. She was buried in one of the cemeteries attached to St. Peter's Church.⁹

Over five years were to pass by before the birth of the next and last child, again a girl. By this time the des Places family had moved house. The move did not take them very far away, a mere few minutes' walk, but it did involve moving into another parish; so the youngest member of the family, called Jeanne-Françoise, was baptised in the church of St. Germain. Once again the Marbeufs and the Ferrets are the sponsors, this time Françoise Marbeuf, la Comtesse du Hou, and Jean Charles Ferret, Counsellor of the Parlement de Bretagne.¹⁰

Three of the Ferret family will appear again in our story in connection with the setting up of a seminary for poor scholars in Rennes, a work which would no doubt influence Claude's own vocation. The parish church of St. Germain will also figure in connection with his choice of the dedication of his work to The Holy Spirit as a confraternity dedicated to the Holy Spirit was established there in 1698. It is in this church, in fact, that the magnificent plaque to the memory of Claude and his associates was unveiled in 1959 to mark the 250th anniversary of his death.

The des Places family as we saw had moved house when Claude was six. One might ask why? We cannot be sure. Did they not own a house of their own at St. George's Gate? There were not many houses available in that area which they had probably chosen in order to be near the Marbeufs. St. George's Abbey rented out apartments in the portion of the huge complex that bordered the public road at the

Place Saint-Georges. It could be that des Places senior in his bachelor days had found it convenient to rent rooms there even while he was buying up property in other parts of Rennes and its environs. Finally we must remember that des Places was responsible too for part of the temporal affairs of the Abbey.

MOVING UPWARDS

The house they now moved into was also rented, this time from the Franciscans. The move to rue des Cordeliers, or St. Francis' Street, brought them closer to the Hôtel des Monnaies where des Places from then on was to have his main theatre of operations as Juge Garde des Monnaies – the Legal controller at the Mint. It also brought them to the doorstep of the Palais de Bretagne, the seat of the Parlement of Brittany; and this institution had by now a special significance for des Places in his designs for his son's future. Another possible reason for the des Places moving out of St. George's Abbey could have been a certain amount of unpleasantness that developed between the good ladies of this wealthy Benedictine abbey and the local population. One cause of the friction was the accumulation of rights and privileges claimed by the abbey over tolls and fishing rights along the river Vilaine. Also a sport centre, *jeu des paumes*, constructed near the boundary walls of the abbey was notorious for the bad language to be heard coming from there, due it seems to its becoming a gamblers' haunt. The Sisters (some of whom were of the blood-royal), sought for and succeeded in getting certain restrictive clauses passed by the town councillors but in the absence of an adequate police force there was no serious effort made to enforce these restrictions. In fact the offenders responded by pelting stones occasionally through the windows of the Mother Abbess's room and even when she moved out of the range they used a gun to drive the message home to the Abbess in her exalted retreat! She may be the same abbess who designed the massive mansion in 1650 and had her own name sculptured in large letters across the masonry to a length of some 50 yards, namely Magdelaine Lafayette. Part of the imposing frontage of this building was only being completed, incidentally, the year Claude was born.

The subsequent history of this religious institution need not detain us here except to mention that it suffered severely, as did all religious houses, from the French Revolution. St. Peter's church was suppressed and eventually demolished. The abbey itself was taken over as a military barracks. Since 1921, however, it houses the social services headquarters of Rennes. Severely damaged by fire it has been beautifully restored and renamed as St. George's Palace, one of the showpieces of Rennes.¹¹

No trace of the church where Claude was baptized and where he made his first contact with church life now exists, apart from the sketches that survive and some objects in the Museum. Some large metal letters survive in the rear wall of the former convent facing towards St. Peter's Church. The original inscription seems to have been 'Jesus et Maria'. One wonders what, if any, impressions this contact with the abbey and church of St. Peter's at St. George's left on the young Claude. But like so many other questions on his early formation, extant records afford little help.

This is all Fr. Thomas, his earliest biographer, who knew Claude from 1704 'till his death, has to tell us about these early years:

They offered their newborn to the Lord who had given him and in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary they dressed him in white for a period of seven years. They were given reason at a later date to believe that the Blessed Virgin had accepted their offering for they were convinced that on several occasions the

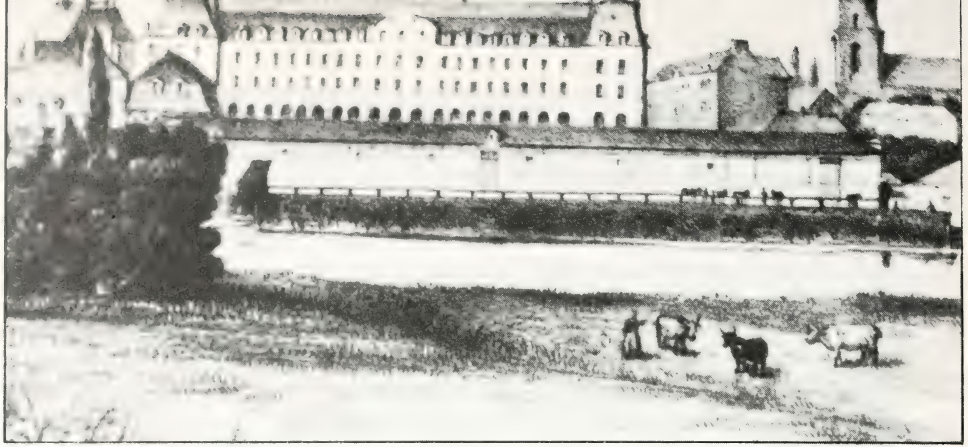
Mother of God has used her power to preserve their son's life. This was also the belief of Fr. Des Places himself. He always had a tender devotion towards Mary, as appears from his many devotional practices in her honour and his zeal to communicate this love of Our Lady to souls who were dependent on him.

His parents took great care to instil piety in him at a tender age and neglected nothing to give him a careful Christian education. As is the case with a great many saints, his childhood diversions presaged the state for which God had destined him and the services which, for the good of the Church, he wanted to obtain from him. He occupied his time with the building of chapels and erecting small altars. He used the money he received to buy what he considered necessary ornamentation for them. His great pleasure was to imitate the ceremonies which he had seen performed in a church. Sometimes his parents' patience was tried by it but if he desisted for a while out of obedience to them, he was soon back at his favourite way of playing a little later on.¹²

In spite of the generalised nature of these statements and the lack of concrete detail, certain things do emerge. Firstly, that the parents were devout Christians and not merely nominal church-goers. Secondly, there is quite an illuminating insight on Claude's temperament and the childhood games of the age. In the absence of meccano sets and other modern hobbies, cowboys, games, etc., the boy's imagination fastened on what he saw in the nearby church – the religious services and the sacred ornaments. The church, not the cinema or theatre, was the first contact with the big world outside the family home, where he was the lone child. The father was abroad, busy with his legal and commercial affairs which would have meant little to the child. Had he access not merely to the public church but also to the Abbey conventual church? One can imagine that the services there, the singing, the ornamentation, were something above the ordinary parish church standard. It is possible too that the Benedictine sisters felt themselves pastorally involved, at least with the more devotionally disposed, and with the children. But then Claude's association with St. Peter at St. George ended at the age of six. And what could he have bought from his pocket money for the making and ornamentation of his play-time chapels? There were, incidentally, some of the Abbey rooms at street level along the main road rented as shops; the rooms available for renting as living quarters were in the upper floor of this block.

The des Places family as we saw moved house early in 1685, a matter of some hundred yards, the full length of rue Saint-Georges, and then into the rue des Cordeliers at right angles to it and facing the big square in front of the Palace of the Parlement. The exact site of their house may well be traceable on maps in this instance as the house was owned by the Franciscans. At least one such house was identified and named *Maison du petit Mont* adjoining the Friary proper; but all this area was reconstructed after the great fire of 1720.

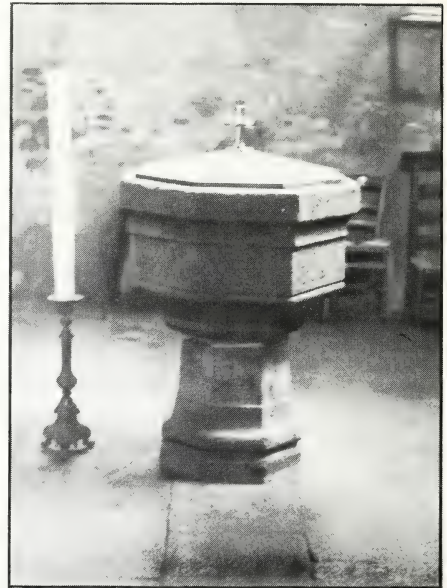
The Franciscans were long established in Rennes, being asked in 1230 by the Duke of Brittany to take charge of St. James's Hospital, a house catering for the pilgrims to St. James of Compostello, Spain. That hospital was soon closed but the Franciscans remained on in possession of an extensive portion of the centre of Rennes. It would seem, however, that the public authorities still had claim to use the property and buildings on occasions for official assemblies. The *Chambre des Comptes* held sessions there in the XVth century. The Parlement of Brittany established in 1561 made its headquarters there until the Palace was completed in 1665. The palace was actually built on grounds formerly used as the Franciscan cemetery. Even the *Etats de Bretagne* often held their assemblies there, the nobles



An ancient view of St. George's Abbey; Claude's birthplace was to left of picture



Comte de Marbeuf, Claude's godfather



Baptismal font at St. Germain Church



Chapel of the Holy Spirit at St. Germain where a plaque commemorates Claude's association with St. Grignon de Montfort and Fr. Julien Bellier

using the refectory as their theatre of deliberations while the clergy and Tiers Etat met in what seems to be a portion of the building usually used as a bank. Madame de Sévigné has left us an account of the lavish festivities held in Rennes during the sessions there of the Etats. Buffets, etc. were set up inside the Friary proper to cater for the large gathering of V.I.P.'s. How much of this life was witnessed by Claude at the age when he was most impressionable we don't know.¹³

Of some interest in the story of Claude, is the fact that the law schools were to be established here in the eighteenth century on being transferred from Nantes. It is ironic to think that Claude had to spend some years away from home in Nantes pursuing his legal studies in the faculty which was to be transferred to his own door step in later years. But that refectory, which saw so many big and varied events even in Claude's schooldays, was to be the seat of the revolutionary clubs after the Revolution had suppressed all religious houses and confiscated their property. Rue des Cordeliers, or St. Francis' Street, is today known as rue Hoche, named after the General Hoche, commander of the unsuccessful French invasion of Ireland at Bantry Bay. During the Revolution he commanded the forces who suppressed the organised opposition to the Revolution in the western provinces of France.¹⁴

The Franciscans had, of course, a church which dated back to the 13th century, and even though it was demolished in 1834, detailed accounts of it are extant. A detail of note for Irish readers is that one of its side chapels was dedicated to St. Fiacre. One wonders again what contact Claude had with this church and with the Franciscan community. They were their landlords and it is unthinkable that they would not have been on very close relations. But the Franciscan church in the shadow of which they lived for five years (1685-1690) was not their parish church. They were, officially at least, in the parish of St. Germain.

St. Germain was one of the long established parish churches of Rennes, traceable back to the 12th century. The present church building has parts dating from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁵ The first official contact the des Places family had with St. Germain was the baptism there (11 December 1685) of their third and last child, named Jeanne-Françoise. The godmother was Françoise de Marbeuf, Comtesse du Hou, and sister of l'Abbé de Langonnet. Her godfather was Jean Charles Ferret, Conseiller du Parlement.

Jeanne-Françoise, unlike her elder sister, was to see a ripe old age and was to inherit the des Places' fortunes when Claude opted not merely for the priesthood but for a life of poverty. Claude was almost seven years when Jeanne Françoise was born and he tells us in his retreat notes that he had a very tender affection for her. Till her arrival he was the centre of the des Places home, but one can well imagine that his mother, a very experienced educator after her years devoted to caring for the Marbeufs, was not likely to spoil her own.

Finally, taking a look into the future: it was in the Church of St. Germain near the main sacristy that Jeanne-Françoise's son, Henri Le Chat, was to be buried. Claude had acted as sponsor at his baptism.¹⁶

EARLY EDUCATION

When Claude arrived at school-going age there were no regular primary schools. St. John Baptist De La Salle had opened his first such school the year Claude was born but it would take many years before any network of primary schools spread throughout the country. In the last months of Claude's life he was to be engaged in a tentative scheme of co-operation with De La Salle to prepare schoolmasters for rural and poorer areas in France. For the moment, however, it was only the wealthy who could afford to engage a private tutor to give their

children any methodic training in the three R's. We saw that Claude's mother had secured the services of her cousin Father Peter Cheux de La Maidonneure to aid her in the instruction and schooling of the Marbeuf young children to whom she acted as governess. He remained on with the Marbeufs until 1681 but there is no record that his services were availed of to initiate Claude into the art of reading and writing. Often in those days the people who were glad to be employed in such a service were the "poor scholars", i.e. clerical students studying for the priesthood. These attended lectures in some college while they boarded out as best they could and tried to pay for their keep from whatever odd jobs they could find. This was not a satisfactory situation for these candidates to the priesthood and it was in remedying this state of affairs that Claude was to devote his life later. One wonders if he had the services of such a poor scholar in his own preparatory schooling. If so, it was one further manifestation of providence at work in his life. Fr. Thomas in his usual generalised style has this to say:

He had not only to satisfy his regent but also had to reassure his parents. During holidays he was required to give an account of the time he spent on his outings and of his duties. On Sundays and feast days he was asked to give a summary of the sermon. Mr. and Mrs. des Places did not shift on to anybody else the responsibility for the education of their son who was so dear to them and on whom the hopes of their house rested. As a result they had the consolation of seeing their carefulness well rewarded by his academic achievements and by the great promise of excellent qualities...¹⁷

It is not clear whether the word 'regent' here is meant to be taken in its normal connotation of regent of a class in secondary school, or a tutor employed by the family. What is abundantly clear is that the parents supervised in detail the studies and conduct of their son. It may well be that both parents, being educated people, took over completely the education of their son in these early days, but it is unlikely that they could afford the time. Someone must have taught him to write at an early age as his first recorded signature at the age of 7 shows a remarkably mature hand. This was the occasion of his signing the parish register in the Church of St. Germain when he acted as sponsor for Claude Floh, a son of an employee of his father.¹⁸

One notices the importance of the church services in the life of the people at a time when the Sunday sermon was the only public speech which was heard during the week. Of interest too is the importance given to the *promenade* which usually refers to an organised school outing of recreational and educational character. In Rennes this would have quite a significance because of the many churches, institutions, public buildings, ancient fortifications, etc. It was after all the capital of Brittany and a promenade on which Claude was to be questioned was bound to be more than a moping-round-town affair. And then without moving far from his own house he was at the very heart of the administrative centre of this ancient province. The Etats of Brittany held their irregular meetings in the very complex in which he lived, and across the street from him was the permanent seat of government in practice, the Palais du Parlement de Bretagne (Palace of the Parlement of Brittany).

THE PALACE

Claude may be said to have literally lived in the shadow of this institution from the age of six to eleven. Indeed he was never allowed to lose sight of it, as it was the cherished dream of his parents, certainly the determined goal of his father, that he would one day take his place in that seat of honour as a conseiller du

Parlement de Bretagne and in so doing restore the family to its full status of nobility and not merely the limited status enjoyed by the family of the Juge-garde des Monnaies.

This parliament was not a sovereign and independent law-making institution as we know parliaments today. Brittany had been annexed to France away back in 1500, after many years of conflict, when Charles VIII married Anne of Brittany. In 1561 it was granted it separate *parlement* which was the administrative headquarters of the province. The fortifications of the town were partly demolished in 1604 and some years later it was decided in principle that a building in keeping with the dignity of the Parlement de Bretagne be erected. In those days that meant a palatial edifice. The site chosen was the open square in the centre of Rennes, known as St. Francis Square, and was under the control, if not the ownership of the Franciscans. Until this building was completed the parlement had its general meetings in the Franciscan priory.¹⁹ The first plenary session held, 16 January 1655, in the as yet unfinished building, was conducted by President Claude de Marbeuf.

The palace of the parlement was rated by the much travelled writer, Madame de Sévigné, as the most beautiful in France, and Saulnier in his turn wrote of the institution: "Of all the parlements in France, Paris apart, none has greater style nor plays such a grand role as the *parlement* of Brittany". The people of Brittany were jealous of their independent tradition and resisted the severe encroachments on their rights and property by the central government when Colbert's taxation net spread wide in its sweep (1675). The people of Rennes revolted but were severely suppressed and in punishment the parlement was transferred for a period to Vannes. M. des Places lost his title to noble status at this period due to inability to produce the required title deeds.

By the time Claude was born the parlement had returned to Rennes and it had taken over possession of the palace, though the interior decoration was still in progress. They had, in fact, secured the services of one of the leading painters of France, who had contributed to the decoration of the palace of Versailles, namely Jean Jouvenet.²⁰

It is more than likely that young Claude's contact with this palace went further than watching the external pomp and ceremony, the arrival of the coaches, the display of official robes, etc. As his father was an *avocat du parlement* or barrister his business would have taken him frequently to the sessions there. And then the President of the Parlement was none other than Claude's godfather, Le Comte Claude de Marbeuf. The splendour and spaciousness of this big building could not but have impressed him deeply. In later years, when he weighed up the prospects for him of a career in the legal world there, his criterion was, 'would it help him to protect the poor?' But there was nothing small or mean about his outlook on the world. And at this stage of his life he was not looking to this institution for what it could do for him; rather his approach was what he could do on his own personal merit. His father, one can be sure, with an eye to the future, was much more calculating in the contacts that he cultivated and the influence that he won.

One incident must be mentioned. In 1694-5 the painter Jean Jouvenet was commissioned to do part of the interior decoration. Claude was then in his sixteenth year and would have been more fascinated by the artist at work than by the palace grandees. He may have been introduced to him personally by Comte de Marbeuf who would be responsible for commissioning him in the first place, or by Barthélemy Ferret, his godmother's husband who, apart from being a conseiller of Parlement, was the treasurer and paymaster for all expenses and wages in connection with the palace. This could explain why Jouvenet would have

taken time off to do the sketch which may have served as the basis of the portrait of Claude which is preserved today in a Munich Art Gallery.

1690 may be a red letter day in Irish history because of the Battle of the Boyne and all that. It was a red letter year for the des Places family too: it was marked by a further change of house, and the arrival of a cousin, Anne Marie Lamisse, to live with them as part of the household.²¹ The arrival of Anne Marie must have made quite a change as Claude was the sole child for years. Even when Jeanne-Françoise arrived there could be no comradeship, they being separated by some 6 years. In 1690 she was still only five. So the arrival of Anne Marie, his cousin on his father's side, must have made quite a difference. Then the change of house marked another era for him as he was now more able to appreciate such an event than when they moved from Porte-Saint-Georges. The new move was again not far, a matter of a few hundred yards, but it was in some ways like going into a different world.

A FORMATIVE MILIEU

One might ask again why did they move? One did not move house lightly in those days. It might well be that their lease in the Franciscan owned house was up. In actual fact the real question is why they did not move sooner. From July 1685, as Juge-Garde des Monnaies, Mr. des Places was entitled to reside free of charge in the premises provided in the Hôtel des Monnaies. Perhaps their living quarters in the big complex were not yet completed. From 1690 to June 1698 the des Places family are on record as having lived in rue Saint-Sauveur, the street flanking the church of that name and linking it with the cathedral. Once again it has not been possible to pin point the exact location of the des Places home and we have to remember that most of that area perished in the great fire of 1720. One of the ancient houses which escaped the fire and which has been restored in recent times, No 5, at the corner with rue de La Psalette, was known in the 18th century as Hôtel du Saint-Esprit and Maison des Chevaliers du Saint-Esprit. It would be a rare coincidence if the 'House of the Knights of the Holy Spirit' had been lived in by the future founder of the Seminary and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Records show us that his house did change hands in 1690 but the new owner is not given as des Places.²² What is of relevance to our story is that it was in this clearly defined area that Claude was to spend the years when he was most open to being consciously influenced by his surroundings. Many of the houses in that quarter had been at some time or other used for ecclesiastical purposes, mostly in connection with the cathedral and the church of Saint-Sauveur. Two places which were to influence Claude were the house lived in by Fr. Julien Bellier, who kept an open house for his youth groups, and the church of Saint-Sauveur where Grignon de Montfort was to be a daily visitor because of the presence there of his maternal uncle Fr. Alain Robert de La Visuelle who acted as assistant pastor.

It was from this house in rue Saint-Sauveur that Mr. des Places was to mastermind his ambitious scheme to buy up much of the property along rue de La Cordonnerie which ran parallel with rue Saint-Sauveur and was linked to it by the short street, rue Guillaume. It was in this property that Claude's father was to build the new family home to his own specifications and the offices, coach houses, storerooms etc. which were to serve as the headquarters to their expanding business operations.²³ His offices at Hôtel des Monnaies were just conveniently across the road.

The cathedral itself, which took centuries to build, was undergoing the final touches as its towers were being completed during Claude's last years at Rennes. The main years of his life as a student were spent in this area, quite near the house



Shrine of Our Lady (N.D. des Miracles) at Saint-Sauveur Basilica

Claude François Poullard

Claude's signature as sponsor at 13



St. Grignon; his signature as sponsor at 13



Saint-Sauveur St. where the des Places family lived 1690-98; nearby lived Grignon de Montfort's uncle, Fr. Robert, and Fr. Bellier, the des Places commercial premises and new house were at the rear of the houses to the right

Loius Grignon

in rue Guillaume occupied by l'Abbé Bellier whose influence on his life was to be paramount. The few incidents recorded for us by Fr. Thomas about life in the des Places home are to be located in this area.

Rue Saint-Sauveur took its name from the church of that name which had been given the rank of a Basilica. It had a long history but its principal title to fame is that one of its side chapels housed a famous shrine of Our Lady known as Our Lady of Miracles. The most famous miracle according to tradition was that the statue of Our Lady saved the city during the Hundred Years War by indicating the exact spot where the English invaders were tunnelling under the fortifications and thus alerted du Guesclin and his men. The statue escaped destruction by the great Fire 1720 and was hidden away during the Revolution. It was replaced in 1876 and ever since it has drawn its clientele of devotees; the votive tapers in abundance give evidence of this.²⁴

The pastor at Saint-Sauveur was Fr. Alain de La Visuelle-Robert. He might never have been heard of afterwards were it not that his sister's son, known to us as St. Grignon de Montfort, came to live with him in 1685 in order to be able to attend the Jesuit college, St. Thomas. Louis Marie Grignon had been born near de Montfort some fifteen miles from Rennes and he was in later years to assume the name de Montfort in place of his family name de La Bachelleraie as a symbol of his total break with kith and kin. His father, like des Places senior, was an avocat or barrister but he made no fortune from his profession. He moved into Rennes in 1689 so as to be able to give his children the chance of a good education. They lived for a while in the vicinity of St. Germain church where we find Grignon's signature as a sponsor and at least one of the family was baptised in that church. It is quite possible that they were well known to the des Places family even before the latter moved house to rue Saint-Sauveur as records show that des Places' official notary, called on to witness legal documents at this period, was Mr Chassé an uncle of Grignon.²⁵

Though St. Sauveur Basilica was not on the direct route for Grignon as he travelled to and from St. Thomas' school, he visited the shrine of Our Lady of Miracles there every evening and spent at least an hour in prayer.²⁶ It was at this shrine that Claude, six years his junior, most likely made his first personal contact with Grignon and thus began a friendship that was to have fruitful consequences for both. Their mutual devotion to Our Lady, rather than the legal background of their respective families, was the source of their friendship. It is possible that when Claude was starting off at St. Thomas' the des Places parents got Grignon to act as his guardian angel as he moved from the sheltered situation of his home to the huge school where there were over three thousand students. From 1890 the route followed by Claude to school passed through rue du Chapitre where Grignon's family then lived, and as it is almost certain that in the beginning at least the family coach was put at Claude's disposal with a servant in attendance, we can imagine them picking up Grignon en route. What is certain is that Claude and Grignon were close friends at this stage, and since this was not due to their being together within the school, remembering the disparity in their ages, it was outside school activities that brought them together. We will have occasion to hear something about these extra-curricular activities, but first we will make our acquaintance with the great Jesuit college of Saint-Thomas which had such a formative influence on Claude.

Secondary Education 1688-1695

COLLÈGE SAINT-THOMAS

Collège Saint-Thomas was one of the leading schools conducted by the Jesuits in France. It had a roll in excess of 3,000 and some sixty members of the Society were involved in the conducting of the school which catered for students starting at *infima classis grammaticae* through to philosophy and theology. It had a retreat house also attached and conducted an active sodality which involved past as well as present students.

The St. Thomas to whom the school was dedicated was the Thomas a-Beckett, the martyr of Henry II fame, reminding us that the Norman Kingdom spanned the English channel in those days. Saint-Thomas had been a priory, then a hospital, and around the middle of the 16th century it was handed over to the town authorities to open a school there.¹ With the spread of the Jesuit order and the success of their system of education, moves were soon made to enlist their services but due to a witch-hunt conducted on a national scale against the Jesuits in connection with an attempt on the life of Henry IV by one of their past students, negotiations were broken off. When, however, the King, who saw no reason to see in the Jesuits other than deeply committed religious men, opened the college at La Flèche which he handed over to their care, the tide turned in their favour. The Rennes authorities once more besought the Jesuit Fathers to take charge of their school, now greatly extended to prepare for the new régime. The Jesuits eventually took charge in 1607, the year remembered in Ireland for the Flight of the Earls. One of the early Jesuit rectors of the College at Rennes, Fr. Guy Le Meneust is said by Père Le Floch to be an uncle of Claude's mother, but he gives no proof for this.² Fr. Le Meneust had died away back in 1646 at La Flèche where as a young man he had as pupil the famous philosopher Descartes but, because of his reputation for intellectual brilliance and for the religious formation he had given many of the leading Jesuits connected with the remarkable renaissance of Christian piety and worship in Brittany in the 17th century, his memory was still fresh in the Society when Claude entered Saint Thomas.

The paucity of details with regard to Claude's dates and doings is due in great measure to three historic events, the destruction of the family papers in the fire of 1720, the suppression of the Jesuits in 1762, and the confiscation in 1792 and again in 1830 of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris. As there are no carefully preserved school records or registers to guide us with regard to Claude's years at St. Thomas, one need not wonder that his biographers differ even with regard to his date of entry. Père Le Floch puts that date as 18 October, the feast of St. Luke, 1686, '*in Lucalibus*' being the official opening day. That would mean that Claude began at the lowest rung of the Jesuit educational system as outlined in the *Ratio Studiorum* and would leave him seven and a half at starting school.³ Père Michel, who has meticulously covered all the ground first charted by Le Floch, at first put the date of Claude's entry as late as 1690 but more recently has opted for 1688, having him begin in 6th class, from the top, that is.⁴ Claude would then be nine

and a half, and though that might seem a bit late to start school, when they had the facilities of the Jesuit school so near them at that stage, one must keep in mind the words of Fr. Thomas who had known Claude from 1704-1709, namely: "The des Places parents were not the sort who easily handed over the education of their only son and prospective heir to the complete care of any regent whosoever".⁵ One practical detail that would depend on these dates is who was rector then and who was Claude's regent? Le Floch gives as rector, quoting from a Jesuit directory, Fr. Julien Baudran, who is described in contemporary records as a 'polished orator, a skilled administrator, deeply religious and of a gentle disposition'. As providence would have it he was to be rector of the great Jesuit college in Paris, Louis Le Grand, when Claude went there to study theology, and was later attached to the house for professed members of the Jesuits in Paris when Claude was struggling to cope with his foundation for the poor scholars.⁶

It was a pretty daunting challenge for a boy of Claude's tender years, reared till then in a sheltered home where he was the only son and whose every occupation was controlled and planned with loving parental care, to be launched into an establishment which could boast of at least 3,000 students. But the experience in practice may not have been so overpowering: the Jesuit system catered for the needs of the newcomers in that it did not expose them to a multiplicity of teachers or functionaries at that age group. There was a regent for each class who was their teacher and guide. Not merely that but he took this class from year to year right up to *seconde*. Claude's regent was a Fr. Gilbert Petit. Rennes was his first appointment. Later he was to be sent to the missions in the Far East and after some years he was to return again to France to be rector of colleges in Moulins and Nevers.⁷ This, incidentally, highlights a distinctive aspect of the Jesuit system. The students could sense that they belonged to a great world-wide organisation and in the days before radio and TV, and even before newspapers, this was an educational factor in itself. The staff were moved periodically from one college to another for reasons best known to the various provincial superiors. One consequence of this for the individual schools was that it prevented stagnation and allowed for an enrichment from the experience of other regions, while the keeping to the fixed ratio studiorum or plan of studies precluded variations due to incompetence. The uniformity of the system of studies would enable us to monitor in general outline the academic course followed by Claude and even the methods of teaching, but we do not think it would be expedient to go into such detail here. We are assured that Claude was at the top of his class and took to the academic discipline with obvious ease right up to the end of his school career.

Aspects of the Jesuit system of education had, of course, their critics even in those days: for example, its over-emphasis on Latinity at a time when modern languages were coming into their own and when this was catered for in other types of schools, and the excessive use of 'emulation' as a means of stimulating effort, that is the setting of one group of students in battle type competition with another group. There were those who revolted against the system and became severe critics of the Jesuits – past students like Descartes, and Voltaire, etc., but these very names and their brilliance, not to mention those like Bossuet and Bourdaloue who did not bite the hand that fed them, do but serve to underline the greatness of the Jesuit system at its best, a system that evoked the envy and praise of such outsiders as Bacon and Carlyle. But of the defects of the Jesuit system of education or of any other recriminations there is not the slightest murmur in the story of Claude Poullart des Places. In fact his whole attitude to life and his achievement was openly based on what he had inherited from the Jesuit Fathers with whom he had spent his entire academic career.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

Claude came under the direct influence of Fr. Descartes, nephew of the philosopher and a noted spiritual director, especially as a member of the very influential sodality of Our Lady conducted by the Jesuits for the students and adults. It may well be that it was Fr. Descartes who is referred to in the most quoted incident in the early religious development of Claude, related with a slight variation by both Fr. Thomas and Fr. Besnard. First the account given by Thomas as it was the first in the order of time; it concentrates exclusively on the role played by Claude:

First Fr. Thomas:

As he advanced in age he progressed likewise in piety. When he began to go to high school, instead of amusing himself like his companions with the customary games and horse play of young boys, he gathered together some friends and, without saying anything about it to either his parents or his teacher, formed a pious association. These boys assembled on certain days in a room put at their disposal by a devout lady who shared their secrets. There they had fixed up a well-furnished oratory and on all solemn feasts they lighted a great number of candles which had been bought by the members of the group. They had their rules for prayer, silence and mortification. The latter sometimes included taking the discipline. In other words, they practised virtues of which they could hardly have had very clear ideas.

These dispositions of young des Places were so much more admirable because he had a lively and restless temperament that inclined him in a quite different direction. These dispositions were no doubt the effect of the profound impression made by the good instruction of his father and mother and his masters, aided by grace.

These devotional practices could not remain hidden for long. A Jesuit Father who directed our young scholar found out about them. He ordered the group to disband, for he told Claude that self-love might have a greater share in this than the love of God, or at least might eventually get mixed up in it. Moreover, it was to be feared that their fervour, which was perhaps already going too far, might lead them into indiscretions. The boy obeyed his director, but this act of obedience was a more trying mortification for our young penitent than all the others.⁸

Besnard writes about des Places only in the context of his associations with Grignon de Montfort, the main subject of his biography. While obviously making use of Thomas' account, he adds the significant detail about Grignon's involvement in this secret Marian society. Besnard was himself a native of Rennes, being born in the parish of St. Germain in 1717, and he did all his studies for the priesthood at Rennes. After his ordination in 1741 he was transferred to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris for two years extra study after which he decided to join Grignon de Montfort's society of which he was later to be the Superior General.⁹ Besnard then would have had access to other sources from which he could have learned about the role played by Grignon in this little society which may in fact have been an extension of the special section of the Sodality of Our Lady being then attened by Grignon in Fr. Bellier's presbytery nearby. We give Besnard's account in full even though for the most part it is a repetition of what he found in Thomas' manuscript:

It was there he entered into close friendship with Louis de Montfort. They joined together to establish, along with some of their fellow students, a little



Wing of Jesuit College with church in the background



Views of Jesuit church, All Saints



association for the purpose of honouring the Blessed Virgin in a special way. The group gathered on certain days in a room which a saintly lady put at their disposal. They erected a kind of oratory to perform their exercises and they all shared the cost of decorating it. They had their rules for prayer, silence and mortification. The latter sometimes went so far as to include taking the discipline. These pious meetings continued for some time after Louis left for Paris thanks to the zeal of Claude to whom he had recommended them and who alone remained their animating spirit and support.¹⁰

Apart altogether from what these lines tell about his devotion to Our Lady, they give us some indication already of the charism Claude had for leading others on to do willingly what they might not have chosen of their own accord and his generosity in spending himself and all he had for a cause which he thought worthwhile.

One would wish to know something about these companions of Claude. There is no record of their names, but a number of his contemporaries at Rennes did, however, follow him later to Paris to join him in his work. Notable among these were his two closest helpers, Fr. Michael Vincent Le Barbier and Fr. Peter Caris of saintly memory. It may be of some sentimental interest to mention that among the many dusty documents uncovered by Père Michel is one routine legal statement dated 1686 bearing by some providential coincidence the signatures of the parents of Claude, Vincent and Peter!¹¹

Another contemporary who is better known was John-Baptist Blain. A close friend and classmate of Grignion de Montfort, he followed him to Paris to study for the priesthood. Awarded a doctorate by the Sorbonne he was to take an active part in church life and was made a canon of the cathedral of Rouen. He is best remembered today for his biography of John Baptist De La Salle and his personal memoir on Grignion de Montfort as he had known him at Rennes and afterwards. It will be of interest to quote from what Blain has to say about Grignion at the time when he and Claude and others were involved in that “secret” society devoted to honouring Our Lady; here we recognise clearly already the unmistakable lineaments of the future author of the Marian classic ‘A Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin’.

This is what M. Grignion was like when he studied philosophy under the guidance of a Jesuit Father, Father Prévost, who was very pious and also very zealous for the sanctification of his pupils. He was in charge of the Sodality for the senior boys and had a special devotion to Mary, which he tried to impart with ever greater zeal. I would be tempted to say that M. Grignion owed to him his own devotion to Mary if he had not already revealed it from the cradle, as it were.

Love for Mary was almost as if innate in M. Grignion; it can be said that she had first chosen him as one of her greatest favourites and had implanted in his young heart the special tenderness which he always showed towards her and which caused him to be regarded as one of the greatest devotees of the Mother of God the Church has ever known. In his early years, he was, on a small scale, so to speak, what he was to be on a large scale later on: the zealous panegyrist of the Blessed Virgin, constantly speaking of her privileges and of her great virtues, tirelessly preaching devotion to her. As a boy, what he enjoyed most was to speak of her or listen to other people speak of her, and later on his greatest joy was to propagate her cult and increase the number of those dedicated to her service.

When he was kneeling in front of an image of Mary, young Grignion

appeared to be completely unaware of everyone else, being, as it were, in a trance with his senses in some way suspended: he would kneel for an hour at the foot of her altars, looking devout and carried away, motionless as if spellbound. He would thus pray to her, honour her, paying her his homage, begging her to protect him, consecrating his innocence to her, imploring her to keep it safe, dedicating himself to her service. This heartfelt devotion was not a fleeting emotion, as is the case with so many children; it was part of his daily life. Every day on his way to and from school he would go to St. Saviour's, his parish church, and pay a visit to an old miraculous image of Our Lady which was kept there; and his uncle testified that he sometimes spent an hour there.¹²

The actual identity of the other young students who secretly banded themselves together to honour Our Lady is not what matters. The very existence of such a group among students of that age group is foreign to our twentieth century outlook. It may well seem strange to us, even unnatural, but it fits in perfectly with what is known of the spiritual 'secret' societies or *bandes* as they were later called, which were quite common among the students of senior seminaries in France then and later, and which may have percolated into junior levels through the influence of 'prefects' or junior clerical teachers. It is not at all improbable that there was such a 'secret' core in the senior sodality of Our Lady at Rennes also.¹³

But then that is jumping very far ahead when our subject may just have but received his first Holy Communion! There is no extant reference, in fact, to Claude's receiving his first Communion. That may well have taken place before entering Saint-Thomas. But there are descriptions of the pomp and ceremonial which normally attended such occasions in Jesuit schools at the time and as one reads these accounts one gets some idea of the richness of imagination that went into the planning of these ceremonies in France at that period. Perhaps they sound a bit over-flamboyant for our more self-conscious attitudes but they were apiece with the style of life, liturgy and architecture of the day.¹⁴

The college of St. Thomas was blessed in having a splendid and spacious chapel, which is still standing and acting now as a parish church. This church, dedicated to All Saints, was built between the year 1624 and 1651. The imposing wrought-iron portals still display the monograms SJ and OS recalling the Jesuit connection and the dedication to *Omnium Sanctorum* (All Saints). The interior decoration, notably the magnificent retable, was the work of a skilled member of the Society, Brother Turmel. Large as the church was, there had to be three successive masses to cater for the whole school on occasions when they met for mass. There were as well two other smaller chapels included in the extensive complex, presumably for the community and theological students and for the retreat house.¹⁵

One of the principal occasions when the college students foregathered in the college chapel was at the regular meeting of the Sodality of Our Lady. This sodality was a feature of the religious training in all Jesuit schools by then, and in Rennes in particular it was a formative factor not merely within the whole school itself but was a noted feature of the life of the town as well. They had printed in 1676 a special booklet on the rules and observances of the sodality. Another very special manual followed to act as guide for the members in their visitation of the sick and the poor in the town. Each class in the school had its own sodality with the prayers and practices suited to its age group. The senior students and the adult members had their own separate meetings and were, as we shall see later, a forerunner of societies like the St. Vincent de Paul and the Legion of Mary in their involvement in social work as an extension of their prayer activity. But as this involvement came

later in Claude's school career let us take a look at his participation in other school activities along the way.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The Jesuit system of education provided a balanced programme of development. While providing mainly for the academic studies and the strictly religious training, there was also scope for extra-curricular activities to help the student appreciate the beautiful in sound and in movement, and to cultivate the airs and graces of cultured living which counted for much in the social life of France in the days of Louis XIV.

When Fr. Thomas related the incident of Claude's involvement in forming the religious 'secret' society in honour of Our Lady he commented:

These dispositions of young des Places were so much more admirable because he had a lively and restless temperament that inclined him in a quite different direction. These dispositions were no doubt the effect of the profound impression made by the good instruction of his father and mother and his masters, aided by grace.¹⁶

Claude's 'lively and restless temperament' would today be catered for by participation in team games, scout activities, etc. In 17th century France such outlets did not exist. There were the "customary games and horse play of young boys", but, as Fr. Thomas remarks, Claude did not take too easily to that type of working off of high spirits. The school has its *cour de recreation* as we see from extant sketches but there is no trace in it of the gymnastics paraphernalia so typical of later French lycées. The *discipline militaire* of a later era owed its universal popularity to Napoleon and to his concept of lycées as being mainly a training ground for future officers. That was far removed from the Jesuit system as expressed in one of the extant inscriptions in stone from one of the classrooms: *Ex litteris virtutem percipias*. The Jesuit schools specialised in extra-curricular activities which involved plays, music, dancing and ballet. Each school had its big days when it went on show to the parents and public figures in the town. From contemporary records, as from the brief snippets given by his biographer, it is clear that Claude was not merely involved in this aspect of school life but took leading roles in it.¹⁷ His parents saw to it, as part of his education as a gentleman, that he received private tuition in music and singing. The tutor's identity in this case is known. He was none other than the organist at the cathedral, Joseph Manet. The des Places family lived near the cathedral in rue Saint-Sauveur. In fact their house may well have been previously cathedral property. Claude's father on occasion conducted the legal side of property transactions for the diocesan authorities. Their relations with Claude's music teacher at the cathedral must also have been very cordial as Joseph Manet did him the honour of asking him to act as sponsor at the baptism of his first child. The baptism was performed in Saint-Sauveur which may well have been the church used by the des Places family rather than the cathedral.¹⁸ This would have forged a close link with Grignon de Montfort's uncle, Fr. Alain Robert.

The school theatricals took place each year in February and at the end of the year, for prize day. A booklet was produced for these occasions to be distributed to the audience, giving not merely the cast but descriptive introductions to the theme of the play and the accompanying ballet, as they dealt with allegorical or classical topics. A number of these booklets have fortunately been traced. Two of these record Claude's roles. In that for 27 August 1692, when he was in *Troisième*

(3rd class), he is mentioned among those who danced the ballet, *La Fortune*, in the tragedy of Josophat, King of Juda. Again a booklet for 17 February 1694, when Claude was in Rhetoric, informs us that he acted the role of *La Gloire* in the ballet which accompanied the tragedy of the martyrs Prime and Felicien, a production staged by the students of Rhetoric, i.e., the final year of humanities.¹⁹

Claude took his preparation for these roles very seriously, so much so that on one occasion it almost brought a real tragedy within their happy household. The incident is best told in Fr. Thomas' own words:

One day as he was studying a role for a tragedy in which he was to act, his sister, still young at the time, kept distracting him with her frolicking. To get rid of her and to frighten her as people are wont to do with children, he took up a rifle which was not normally loaded, and thinking it was in its customary condition, he cocked it and pulled the trigger. It actually fired! The shot passed between his mother, his sister and his cousin about two inches from their heads. Everyone was thunderstruck with fear, his father more than anyone else, for he knew that the gun had been loaded because some noise had been heard around the house the night before. However, fright was followed by joy and thanks-giving to the Divine Providence that watched so carefully over the preservation of the family.²⁰

Fr. Thomas' comment on this incident, and another where Claude was this time at the receiving end of gunshot, was that God wanted to condition his parents, as it were, by these extraordinary events into realising that this boy was very dear to him in view of a work that he had chosen him to do.

The other incident in question took place presumably some years later when Claude himself was allowed to hunt with his companions, using firearms. There is no indication given as to where or when it happened. Training in the use of firearms and in the etiquette governing hunting in groups must have been part of the education of a gentleman, but accidents were bound to happen with the type of guns then available, especially in the hands of young bloods. Fr. Thomas tells the incident in just a few lines as an illustration of the special providence at work in the life of his hero:

On another occasion when he was out hunting with some friends, someone mistakenly shot him in the abdomen from a distance of four or five paces. He fell down unconscious and everyone thought he was dead. But God permitted him to be only slightly wounded, just enough to remember it. Consequently he did not fail to show his gratitude to God and the Blessed Virgin to whom he had been consecrated.²¹

These two incidents Fr. Thomas had learned as a result of a confidence given by Claude himself to one of the students in his seminary in later years, the incident being related no doubt to underline for the young man the reality of God's special providence in the daily lives of us all.

The final year of secondary education, or the study of the humanities as it consisted chiefly of in those days, was called "rhetoric", a word which has since become debased, as it now connotes an over-emphasis on the form at the expense of the matter or the content of one's speech. Perhaps the word 'eloquence' may be a more suitable translation, connoting the facility for expressing what is of human interest with a sense of style. The ancient classics, Latin and Greek, had been studied in the previous year with the stress on comprehension of the matter and the language. In the latter half of the 17th century the French language was

creating its own classics and gradually, but not without controversy, these classics were being afforded their due place in the schools and the French language itself was at last being accepted as a fit medium of education. This happened more slowly in schools being conducted by the Jesuits than in some other circles. We don't know how much French was in use in 'rhetoric' when Claude entered that class in October 1694 under the able guidance of Fr. John P. de Longuemare, his regent. The main object of rhetoric, as one might expect, was the study of the classical authors as models of clear and eloquent expression and to use the spoken and written word to emulate the style of these models. Skill in public speaking was an accomplishment much sought after in the days of Louis XIV by men in all walks of public life; especially the legal profession. Today we have lost sight of the etymological origins of the word 'parliament' and we are not helped by the standard of eloquence emanating from such precincts to realise that these institutions were so called because in French *parler* and *parole* emphasise that in *parlement*, whether it be of the legislative type of our day or the judicial sort of 17th century France, the stress was on the spoken word – the eloquent, well-reasoned, even if at times flamboyant speech. Many barristers of those days prostituted the art of eloquence and indulged in tours-de-force of rhetoric that incurred the ridicule and satire of dramatists like Racine, but these were the defects of what in itself was admirable, namely the quest for cogent reasoning, imaginative illustrations and felicity of diction.

This, then, was the task set by Fr. Jean-Pierre de Longuemare for his youthful rhetoricians in 1694. Though only 27 years he was noted for his eloquence as can be gathered from a contemporary periodical called the *Mercur Galant* which took note of his speeches on prize day, presumably because of the presence of the Duc Le Chaulnes, Governor of Brittany, and the first President of the Parlement de Bretagne, Le Comte Claude de Marbeuf. The speech combined some judicious comments on topical affairs with laudatory references to His Majesty, Louis XIV. It was his swan song, however, at Rennes, as he was seconded the following academic year to the big boarding school conducted by the Jesuits in Caen, in neighbouring Normandy.²² This minor change in the Jesuit staff shuffle at the end of the year need not have interested us here were it not that it impinged on the career of one of his students, namely Claude.

CAEN: BOARDING SCHOOL

Fr. de Longuemare took a special interest in Claude. He had observed at close quarters his ability as a student, his talent as an orator and actor, and above all was impressed by his character and whole manner of behaviour. But in spite of Claude's remarkable maturity for his years he considered him too young as yet to advance to the usual next stage, namely, the philosophy course of three years which crowned the liberal education for those wishing to advance to the professions or go on for the church. Claude was as yet only fifteen and a half, and though there were those who finished rhetoric at the age of eleven, included among them Fr. Guy Le Meneust, who is given by Père Le Floch as his grand-uncle, it was decided that Claude should repeat rhetoric; but with a difference. Repeating the same course in the same surroundings is not always conducive to the hoped-for progress. As it happened that Fr. de Longuemare was being transferred to the Caen college, which was a boarding school, he persuaded Claude's parents that it would be in the boy's best interest to send him to Caen for a year. One can well imagine the soul-searching that went on in the des Places family before they consented, as one must not imagine that it was then as now when conditions of communication have made such a change from home to boarding school a much less traumatic

experience for the family and for the student himself. What clinched the matter was the fact that Fr. de Longuemare was once again to be regent of rhetoric. Then Claude's position would be enhanced by the fact that he would now be entering this new world not as a junior but a senior rhetorician and a class leader if he rose to the challenge. But perhaps the words which Fr. Thomas used to portray this stage in Claude's career may help to give a more contemporary reaction to the situation so far:

It would be impossible for me to explain in detail the wonderful education which Claude's parents imparted to him and the progress he made in his studies. I know only that he fulfilled their expectations on both scores. He always had a good deal of piety. Because of his polished manners he earned the respect and friendship of grown-ups and youngsters alike. After he had finished the lower grades and rhetorical studies at the Academy of Rennes, his father, on the advice of his director, decided to have him spend another year studying eloquence at the Jesuit College of Caen. This same director had shown special interest in our young student and he was going to be teaching there. Mr. des Places entrusted his son to him.²³

The Jesuit college in Caen, which had 2000 students attending in 1694, was founded at the suggestion of Henry IV, though not without strong opposition from the local nobles. One of its first students was St. John de Brébeuf. Unlike the college at Rennes it catered for boarders and as such had students from the different provinces of France and from overseas. It is likely that Irish students would have been there in the wake of the flight of the Wild Geese some years previous. Of the special cachet of the education to be had at Caen there could be repeated what Descartes wrote about another famous Jesuit College founded at the request of Henry IV, namely La Flèche:

As quite a number of young men go there from all quarters of France they create a certain mixture of atmosphere in their exchanges with one another which teaches them almost the same things as if they had travelled for themselves. Finally, because of the equality with which the Jesuits treat them all, there is no fuss made about the greatest any more than about the least noble. And this is a wonderful invention in order to help them get rid of the softness and other faults which they could have acquired through the habit of being pampered at home or treated affectionately in the house of their parents.²⁴

So much for Claude's having to rough it, or rub shoulders with the sons of barons, counts, even dukes! Because he was repeating Rhetoric he was on a certain eminence already, one of the 'veterans' as they were called.

Caen was a university town with all that meant in the matter of a more colourful life among the student population. The boarders at the Jesuit college lived in a hostel separate from the school but one can be certain that their movements were under very strict control. Father Thomas, our biographer, who seems to have some personal memories of Caen himself, goes out of his way to emphasise, over-emphasise in fact, the challenge life in Caen presented to Claude. We must remember he was only going on sixteen and under strict supervision.

Although there were many opportunities for becoming dissolute in a large town that is full of young men from different countries who are their own masters, it does not seem that Claude compromised his morals during the

year that he spent there. His parents made sure to recommend him strongly to his director and the man was honour bound to watch his pupil. Moreover the young man had several safeguards on his side. He did not like wine at all, and whether by education or by virtue, was quite indifferent towards the fair sex. His one preoccupation at this time was to distinguish himself and win the increasing approval of his parents and acquaintances by running away with the honour awards that were accorded by a university where brilliant minds were the order of the day. His Director took good care to keep this competitive spirit alive in the young student. Because his own honour was at stake then he had to watch over his pupil, urge him to work, and inspire him with dislike for anything that might distract him from his studies.

The authorities had good reason for being satisfied with him. He won three prizes in the field of Rhetoric. It is easy to understand that in order to succeed as well as he did, one could not afford to waste time or spend it on frivolous amusements.²⁵

About those three prizes, out of a total of five for all in Rhetoric class, Fr. Thomas adds that they were still preserved in the community in Paris in his time as they realised the winning of them was no small achievement in a college that was “one of the most famous in the Kingdom of France and where gifted students from several provinces and even from abroad enter into keen competition”. Fr. Thomas’s final comment on this year spent at Caen goes beyond these mere external rewards, which it would appear have not survived the confiscation of the Seminary during the Revolutions of 1789 and 1830. He says, “It was here he acquired that great facility of expression and grasp of public speaking which later helped him so much in presenting cogent reasons why people should lead a virtuous life”. His regent, Fr. de Longuemare, hit the headlines of the *Mercurie Galant* again for his oratory and for a theatrical production with topical undertones. There is no reason to believe that Claude was left out as a mere spectator after his promising performances in Rennes, but records of that period have not been located.

Devotion to Mary under the title of ‘Mary Immaculately Conceived’ was a distinctive feature of Jesuit spirituality. At Caen one of the sodalities was entitled The Congregation of Mary Immaculate. This devotion had a long history in Normandy, some attributing the institution of the special feast on 8 December to William the Conqueror. This feast is referred to at times as the Feast of the Normans. Part of the popular celebrations for the 8 December at Caen and Rouen was the holding in the university of a public competition in composing poems in honour of Our Lady Immaculate. The Jesuit college was known to have participated from time to time in this competition known as The Palinods. The winning entries, which had been conserved in the municipal archives, perished like so much else in Caen during the blanket bombing of the town in 1944.²⁶ One can imagine Claude being interested in this competition, 8 December 1694, when we recall his participation shortly before in the student secret association to honour Our Lady. Later he was to dedicate his life work to Our Lady under the special title of Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

One notices that a little work published in Caen during Claude’s time there entitled ‘How to spend Holy Week in the Spirit of the Church’ was considered worthy of republishing in English in 1914 by Washbourne Ltd. It gives us some insight into the efforts being made in 1690 to bring the liturgy of the church to bear on the life and devotion of the laity, possibly during the pastoral missions conducted by The Society of Priests of the Holy Spirit of whom we shall hear later.

There are some other points about life in Caen itself that are worth mentioning in the light of Claude's subsequent career and the history of the work he was to initiate. The two thorns in the side of the Church in France in the days of Louis XIV were Gallicanism and Jansenism. Of the two, Jansenism was the more serious. The Jesuits were to the fore in combating both, and they paid the price. They were the target of many vicious attacks from the Jansenists who never pulled punches in any controversy. One such bitter attack was made on a member of the Caen Jesuit community while Claude was at school there and whereas the public controversy which ensued may have tickled the ears of many who were eager for such diversions, it may well have brought home to Claude at this early age the real viciousness of the Jansenists' mind and the uncompromising attitude taken by the Jesuits as a society at a time when many in high places in France wavered in their allegiance. That was one lesson Claude learned well and it determined his preference for the Jesuits in later years.²⁷

On a more positive note: One of the names on the early rolls of the Caen college was that of St. John Eudes, the great pioneer of preached missions for the people and seminaries for the aspirants to the priesthood, a man responsible for a notable *resorgimento* of the Christian way of life in north-west France. His two great weapons, if one may use such a word here, were the preaching of missions to the faithful and the provision of proper seminaries for the formation of the future parish clergy. It was in Caen that he founded the first such seminary in 1643 after a pilgrimage there to the great shrine of Notre Dame de la bonne Délivrance (Our Lady of Refuge). St. John Eudes' first seminary at Rennes was opened in 1670 and, though he passed to his reward when Claude was but a year old, his work and his ideas were to have an influence on Claude's own vocation later. Indeed the spiritual works of the Eudist Fathers at Rennes were to have repercussions on Claude's society many years after his death, this time through his successor Fr. Libermann who had spent two years with the Eudists in Rennes before discovering his real vocation.

When St. John Eudes died at Caen in 1680 his body was buried in the seminary chapel there, but when that building was pressed into service as the Town Hall the saint's remains were transferred to the Jesuit college chapel. This beautiful church had but recently been completed by the time Claude arrived at the college, the architect being the Jesuit, Père André. Built in the classical Jesuit baroque Italianate style it remains exteriorly just as Claude had known it but the splendid interior decor dates from the period after the Revolution when it was made over for use as a parish church known as Notre-Dame de la Gloriette. Having survived the bombing of the town during World War II it functions today mainly as a concert hall recalling its original title Sainte-Catherine des Arts.

Claude returned home when the school year ended in Caen. There was no question of his continuing his studies there at this stage. It is stated in *Gallia Christiana* in its entry about Claude that he did part of his law studies at Caen later. This unsubstantiated statement would seem to get some support from Fr. Thomas when he wrote in the context of Claude's period at Caen:

His preoccupation at this time was to distinguish himself and win the increasing approval of his parents and acquaintances by running away with the honour awards that were accorded by a university where brilliant minds were the order of the day.²⁸

For the moment we return to Rennes to follow his progress at the third level department at St. Thomas.

Third Level Student

1695-1698

PHILOSOPHY STUDIES

Claude was now sixteen and a half years of age, still rather young for grappling with the abstract notions of philosophy. But the fact that there was a course of philosophy tacked on at all to a secondary school course may be even as surprising. Yet we are assured that from 200 to 400 students availed of the higher courses of philosophy and theology.

Though the college of St. Thomas was not a seminary in our understanding of that word, i.e. with the teachers and college authorities *ex professo* preparing actual candidates for the priesthood, yet the majority of the students attending the courses were aspirants for the priesthood. They would, of course, have to find a bishop to adopt them for ordination at a later state. But there were also students attending like Claude himself, who had not as yet chosen their career; and those who had chosen a secular profession, principally law, accepted the philosophy course as part of their liberal studies.

The large numbers are explained by the fact that though St Thomas' College was a day school, students came to Rennes from surrounding towns and even from more distant places. Again, we are told, Irish students were to be found among them.¹ And not all were sons of well-to-do people. The education itself was available free of charge from the Jesuits. We are assured of this by certain writers like La Chatolais who speaks of the sons of artisans and bakers rubbing shoulders with the sons of the nobility. There would be a difference in their out-of-school standard of living of course. But even there the normal costs of their keep were very low. There were hostels run by clerics and even by charitable lay folk at minimal cost to aid these students. Those who could afford it had a paid tutor to help them at their studies and even had one or two servants. Those who could not afford to pay even the minimum cost of their keep worked as tutors to families in the town and did menial jobs like serving at tables, sweeping up, etc. Finally there were those students who depended entirely on charity and whose lot was miserable but who sincerely wanted to get the necessary schooling to qualify for admission to major orders. As we shall see it was to help such destitute but worthy candidates that Claude was later to get involved. For the moment he had no worries about his own material welfare. He was back again in his comfortable home in rue Saint-Sauveur – continuing his trek each morning to St. Thomas' College or, more likely, left and collected by the family coachman.

The philosophy course normally took three years to cover – the first year being devoted to logic, the second to physics and the third to metaphysics and mathematics. There were the regular disputations, when the matters taught during the week, and the month, were covered and tested out in formal disputations which were conducted according to a time-honoured protocol with far more stringent rules of logical procedure than in our school debates. The syllogism was the weapon, and detecting of sophisms in the pursuit of truth took the place of the cultivation of eloquence in expression and control of gesture which was what was stressed in their earlier rhetoric course.

The names of three of the professors in the philosophy faculty are known to us.

Principal among them was the professor of metaphysics, Fr. Prévost. As teacher and as prefect of the Sodality of Our Lady he is mentioned as having had a strong formative influence on Grignon de Montfort a few years earlier. The professor of physics (1695-98) is given as Fr. John Chauveau. Somewhat surprisingly the professor of Logic at Rennes was an Irishman, Fr. Felix Byrne. Felix was born in Dublin but as the Jesuit presence in Ireland had ended due to enforcement of the Penal Laws, he entered the society in Paris the year before Claude's birth. He was sent to Brittany to do his senior studies. After his philosophy course at La Flèche he had spent five years attached to Quimper College as junior master. It is quite possible that Irish Jesuit staff were welcome in houses in Brittany then to cope with a sizeable Irish contingent of students in the wake of the Wild Geese exodus. One presumes Fr. Byrne would have been fluent in Gaelic but by then he would have mastered French sufficiently for teaching purposes. He had expressed his preference for continuing to teach at second-level but for some years after his ordination he was called on to profess philosophy instead.² For class purposes and for the regular disputations the medium was not Gaelic nor local Breton, not even French, but Latin.

The language for logic and metaphysics classes was certainly still Latin. That presented no great difficulty in those days. French had gradually made its inroads into the teaching of physics and mathematics since Descartes published his *Essay on Method* – in French. One can be sure that the philosophy taught was the traditional scholastic brand with the emphasis on the Thomistic approach, although the Jesuits had their own great philosophical writers, notably Suarez. The example of the Council of Trent, which placed the “Summa” of St. Thomas side by side with the Bible, would be more than a pious memory. But it was not a question of all philosophy being merely a matter of studying authors of the distant past. A note of actuality had entered with the advent of Descartes, and a note of controversy too even within the Jesuit order itself.³

Descartes, as we have seen, was a student of the famed Jesuit college of La Flèche, not very distant. He was a Breton and had been taught by Fr. Guy Le Meneust who is stated by Le Floch to have been Claude's maternal grand-uncle. His nephew, Fr. Descartes, was at the college in Rennes, an active and very religious spiritual director and author. The Descartes family had a close connection with Rennes as the philosopher's father had been a counsellor of the Parlement de Bretagne there and some members of the Descartes family still lived in Rennes, notably a Mlle. Catherine Descartes (she died 1706) a member of the *Société Littéraire de Mlle. de Seudéry* and who is described as a fervent and adept supporter of the theories of her uncle. The Descartes family lived in rue de la Cordonnerie just across the road from where M. des Places was in the process of building his new house. There were some enthusiastic admirers of Descartes among the Jesuit Fathers themselves, but in general they subjected his theories to a very critical scrutiny. The students could not but have been aware of this division of opinion and it would have provided a welcome enlivenment to an otherwise theoretical subject matter. In fact it has been claimed that Claude's own retreat notes, composed at Rennes in 1701, show unmistakable evidence of Descartes' influence.

The students, of course, had their own diversions when away from the classroom though we are assured they ‘talked, walked and dreamt syllogisms’. Not all, as one might expect. There are references to students being discovered mitching, asleep under hedges, bird-hunting, etc. when supposed to be at class. They had their legitimate recreation time and holidays during which they are reported as organising competitive sports, discus throwing, some form of handball, swimming,

fishing and even hunting. It could well be that it was on such a hunting outing with the college students that Claude had his miraculous escape from death due to the accidental discharge of a firearm at close range.

The town authorities had to make regulations governing the behaviour of the sizeable body of students who were known on occasion to cause disturbances of the peace and to go on marauding exploits. The carrying of firearms and of offensive weapons was made illegal and the hostels or *pedagogies*, as they were called, were forbidden to allow their students to be out after 8 p.m. These pedagogies were regularly inspected by the Rector of the college and no house was allowed to keep students unless authorised by him. If visiting students were expelled by the college authorities they had to leave the town within three days.

So as the students were sharpening their intellectual faculties they presented a discipline problem to the town authorities, to the school, and to their parents. Claude's biographer, Fr. Thomas, goes out of the way to stress that Claude weathered this rather explosive period of normal development successfully due to his own self-control and to the gentle but firm supervision exercised by his parents who were in close contact with the school authorities. We have then to read between the lines of his customary generalisations, applying these to the circumstances of student life in Rennes at the time as known to us from other sources. He writes:

After his return to Rennes young des Places applied himself to the study of Philosophy. This is usually a critical period of life for adolescents. They are not so strictly controlled as when obliged to give an exact account of their work. They get away with excuses when they have to appear in public. To some extent they make up for lost time by applying themselves to reviewing the assigned matter. Moreover, unlike elementary and secondary schools, there are no longer any prizes and awards to honour the good students and shame the lazy ones. In other words, there is less room for emulation. Reason alone has now a right to be heard, but it is rare that one listens to it when the passions clamour loudly and insistently and their shouts are backed up by the conversations and the example of fellow students. Hence we have to admire a student who is not carried away by such allurements and refuses to become dissolute as soon as he is given greater freedom and independence. It is most fortunate when the authority of the teachers is supplemented and backed up by the alert concern of parents. Claude studied Philosophy under the eyes of his father and mother and they would not have tolerated undue freedom or waste of time. They knew how to maintain their authority and they redoubled their watchfulness over their son. They fostered that noble spirit of emulation which they had always observed in him and if they granted him a little more liberty they took care that he did not abuse it.⁴

Strict parental supervision, the encouragement of the will to excel at his studies, the keen involvement in the study and discussion of philosophy need not in themselves have produced a balanced character or have coped with the explosion that is part of the coming of age, were it not that there was some training of the social consciousness and active involvement in some form of creative social activity. Competitive games and team and club membership were not then the vaunted panaceas they have since become in the matter of providing at least a safety valve. Claude was fortunate that his directors were not mere academicians. Of Fr. Prévost, his regent for philosophy, it is recorded that he was, "a good religious, that he was devoted to Our Lady, and was pastorally minded and cared for the

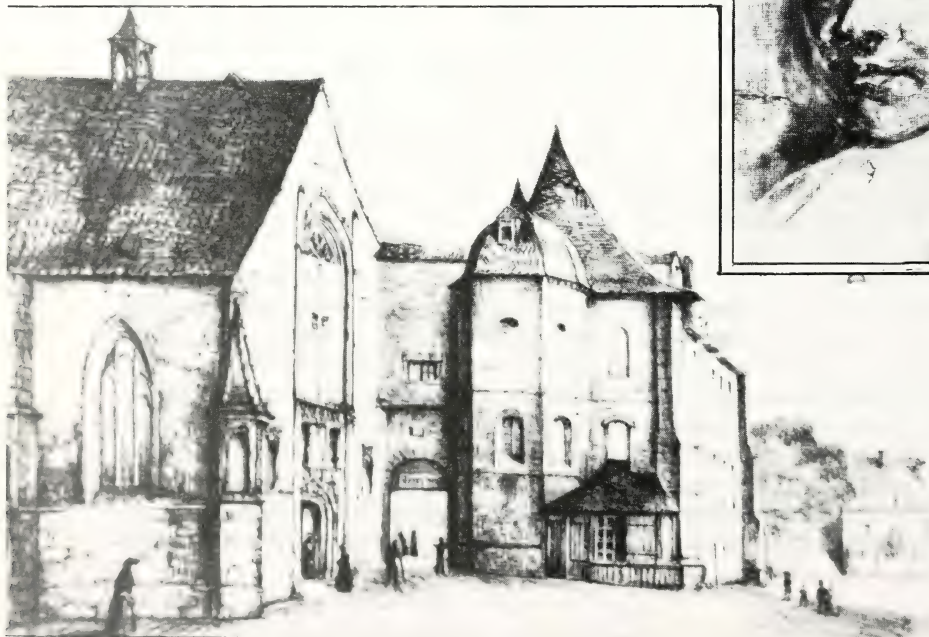


Palace of Parlement being reconstructed after the 1720 fire;
the des Places family lived right of Palace 1685-90

Sketch of Claude used by Jouvenet
for his 1698 portrait



Portion of St. Yves' Hospital and Chapel



formation of his students". We know also that apart from their regent the students were blessed in having as director Fr. Descartes.

SODALITIES AND SOCIAL WORK

One of the principal means of the spiritual formation of the students, apart from religious instruction proper, was membership of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin. The sodality had its regular prayer meetings in the college chapel at which they recited the Office of Our Lady. There were special sodalities for each age group with prayers and exercises in keeping with their age. For the seniors they had printed a special book in 1678, the year before Claude was born, entitled *Le Secours des pauvres assistez dans leurs besoins*, a handbook of some 200 pages to act as a guide to the members of the sodality in their visits to the poor and the sick. The Jesuit Fathers were themselves the spiritual directors of houses of religious sisters in the town, notably the Augustinians who were in charge of the Saint-Yves Hospital, an institution with a long and noble history of caring not merely for the sick as such but also for the aged, the orphans and the disadvantaged sections of the public. Naturally the Jesuits encouraged the members of their sodality, present and past students, to involve themselves actively in the visitation of this hospital and the other such institutions in the town, to read to the patients or inmates during meals and to teach the young the catechism.

One contemporary writer gives us the following idealised picture of the working of these sodalities conducted by the Jesuits as part of their pastoral activities. At the meetings of the sodalities spiritual books were read, the word of God preached, the sacraments frequented, people learned how to pray, the divine office was recited by some, prayers were said in public and private, people encouraged one another by word and example to be zealous in the practice of all the virtues, voluntary collections were made and the alms brought to the reticent poor, to prisoners and to the sick; one learned to make a retreat from time to time to put one's life in order. In a word one learned to serve God and obey one's superiors, fulfil all one's Christian duties, to perform the duties of one's state in life, to love one's neighbour in his corporal and spiritual needs . . .⁵

Recent studies by professional historians have produced amazing evidence of the breadth and intensity of the influence of the Jesuit sodalities on every aspect of Catholic life throughout Europe for two centuries.⁶ They had special sodalities for all ranks in society from royals to artisans so there was a pooled bank of expertise and influence ready to be brought to bear on initiatives that were undertaken. This was to be sensed in particular in their involvement in social work, their efforts to help the poor, to influence the running of hospitals of various types and their care of those in prison. The members of the sodalities of Our Lady were not the only people involved in such works but their cohesion, nationwide solidarity and pooled experience enabled them to act with co-ordination and sustained effort, especially in the collecting of funds and in their distribution through personal contacts. Visitation of the sick in hospital, bringing them material and pastoral care, was one of the main duties of certain sodalities, especially the *Congrégation des Messieurs* (The Gentlemen's Sodality). Claude's father was a member of this sodality.⁷

Students were coopted on to the sodality from Rhetoric class upwards. Each stage of students, rhetoric, philosophy and theology, had their own separate meetings in the college chapel with community prayers and instructions on their duties as active christians. It was not a matter of all prayer and no active work even at this stage. They were encouraged and supervised in the work of catechising the

young children, many of them orphans, in the home for such attached to St. Yves' Hospital conducted by the Augustinian Sisters. Students were also particularly instructed in their duties at home and in the school.

Claude then would have been involved with the sodality of Our Lady from an early age and its ideals and organisation were to have a determining influence on his life and vocation. Apart from the regular meetings of the sodality at school Claude would have been familiar with its work through his father's membership and from the proximity of the family home to a presbytery where regular meetings of young men were held in what was an off-shoot of the sodality, namely in the pastoral care of the various groups of inmates in the large hospital of St. Yves. The Jesuits were chaplains to the sisters' community but the chaplaincy of the hospital was the concern of the parish clergy.

Fr. Julien Bellier, the chaplain at Saint-Yves' Hospital was a remarkable, active and pastorally minded priest. A native of Rennes he had been educated all through by the Jesuits at St. Thomas' College. During the summer months he had joined with some Jesuits from different communities in preaching missions in neglected country parishes. It was the common custom to involve members of the sodality of Our Lady in the organising of such missions, marshalling the people for the various religious exercises and catechising the young in the elements of their religion.⁸ It was unusual that a non-Jesuit should be involved in conducting meetings of sodality members but then Fr. Bellier was a very unusual man. He held regular meetings in his own house near the cathedral for specially chosen members. He presided over their prayer meeting and discussions on religion and related topics. Above all he encouraged them to help him in the pastoral care of the various inmates of the large hospital to which he was chaplain. They were encouraged to take special interest in the orphans, looking after not merely their religious education but also to help train them to a trade and help fit them for some employment.

One who profited richly from his contact with the sodality, and in particular with these meetings held in Fr. Bellier's house, was Grignion de Montfort. Till then he is reported as having led a very retiring career cut off in his devotions from contact with the ordinary people.⁹ It was the beginning of his great pastoral concern. And indeed as one reads the account of Grignion's first chaplaincy at the hospital in Poitiers in 1701, his work among the invalids, his catechism lessons to the poor scholars in the town, his encouraging them to join the Sodality of Our Lady at the Jesuits, etc., – it all sounds as if he had only set out to imitate the sort of work he had seen l'Abbé Bellier do at Rennes. Again his great work later in the preaching of missions throughout Brittany was but a participation in an apostolate to which Fr. Bellier had devoted himself so generously all his life.

There is no documentary evidence in Claude's case that he was actively engaged in the sodality work at this period, though as we shall see there can be little doubt that he had been a member. He was too young in 1892/3 to have taken part with Grignion de Montfort in those meetings at Fr. Bellier's house but we can be certain that as a next door neighbour he was well aware of their existence and would have learned of their purpose.

One other form of activity engaged in by Fr. Bellier in this house a few years later was to have a decisive influence on Claude, namely his giving free board to poor students who wanted to study for the priesthood but could not afford the financial outlay necessary in those days. Taking responsibility for the needy clerical students was not seen by members of the sodality as part of their normal duties. That Claude was to make it his personal concern later as a member of the sodality was no doubt due to the example of Fr. Bellier.

Fr. Bellier was not the only one closely connected with Claude in those years who was deeply involved with the practical day-to-day care of the poor. Claude's own godfather, Le Comte Claude de Marbeuf, was for years intimately involved in the administrative section of this care for the poor. He presided at most of the meetings of le *Bureau des pauvres* which looked after the administration of the hospitals; and when eventually failing health prevented him from maintaining this active interest in the affairs of the Board for the Poor, a delegation came to his town house to present an address of appreciation in remembrance "of all the kindness and works of charity he had performed over so long a period in favour of the poor in the hospitals".¹⁰

Claude's father had not much place in his busy life for this type of voluntary aid which was a great consumer of time and money. More of this later. There is evidence, however, that Claude's mother on the contrary was generous with both her time and property in the succour of the poor. She is on record as having acted on thirty occasions as sponsor at baptism to children, mostly of the poorer classes, and that in itself tells the story about her intimate involvement with their day to day lives. After the death of Claude and his father she disposed of a farm she owned in favour of the poor in the hospital of Saint-Meen.¹¹ So when Claude mentions in his retreat notes that his deep sympathy with the poor would always be a deciding factor in this choice of a career, it was not from the wind that he got that.

Claude's father took a close personal interest in the proper education of his son and heir. He had an eye to the future and an eye to business. His business interests were far flung involving a wholesale trade in cloth, wax, corn, cattle, etc., that had ramifications throughout Brittany. This necessitated a certain amount of travel. He may have taken Claude with him on previous occasions but we have no reference to any such trips till "the vacation that followed his first year". Fr. Thomas mentions that he visited Saint-Brieuc and Nantes but he has no information as to the reason for these trips. Saint-Brieuc and Nantes are in opposite directions from Rennes, so there must have been very specific reasons for visiting both these places. As Claude's father was born at Bréhand-Montcontour, some 15 miles from Saint-Brieuc, one can be reasonably sure that the main purpose of his journey was to visit the ancestral home, whether this was the first time for Claude to do so or not we have no way of knowing. Père Le Floch in his biography states that Claude had travelled on a school outing, under the supervision of a class regent, to Saint Malo and Mont Saint-Michel. These visits he reminds us would have given Claude his first real taste of his roots as it were, because life in Rennes to an extent was a conscious echo of Versailles, and in his classical studies it was the civilisation of Greece and Rome that had helped fill his imagination. But now he had a chance to see the stock from which he had sprung and see at first hand the life of the country folk in Brittany. Especially he must have been introduced to the home crafts which produced the cloth, wax, etc. which till now he had seen merely as wares in his father's spacious stores.¹² We have no indication of the length of their stay nor unfortunately of Claude's reactions to the ancestral way of life.

The visit to Nantes again may have been a return to family roots, this time on his mother's side as it is thought that the Le Menuests originally hailed from there though Claude's mother was born nearer Rennes at Fougères. Fr. Guy Le Meneust, SJ, is given in his obituary as a native of Nantes. It is possible that des Places business interests may have necessitated this visit to the seaport town on the Loire. It was from this port that much of the products of Brittany, its fabrics in particular, were exported to Spain. But it is also possible that the visit was not unconnected with the further plans for Claude's own future career as it would be taken for granted at this stage that he was to follow in the footsteps of his father

in qualifying for the legal profession. As there was no faculty of law at Rennes at this period, the nearest place where Claude could pursue his studies would be at the University of Nantes. So a reconnoitring tour of the terrain was part of the practical planning ahead to be expected from des Places senior. One thing we can be assured of is that he did not go there as a mere sightseer.

A MYSTERY MISDEMEANOUR

When referring to this trip to Nantes Fr. Thomas made this typical comment: "However, it does not seem that he became dissipated in any way, for undoubtedly he would have noted it in the list in which he wrote down these two trips, as he had done for many other items of the same list".¹³ How one would have wished that the list referred to had survived! Then we would not be so dependent on what Fr. Thomas has selected for our edification. It would appear from other sources that something untoward happened during this trip which Claude bitterly repented for the rest of his life but which remained a mystery and posed problems for Claude's biographers till the indefatigable Père Michel uncovered what most likely is that skeleton hidden among the out-of-court settlements for October 1697. That Fr. Thomas knew of the existence of a serious misdemeanour on the part of his hero is abundantly clear as we shall presently see; that he knew the precise nature of that misdemeanour is not at all certain; that he has mistaken the time when it happened seems to be certain; but then Fr. Thomas never allows a precise date to disturb the flow of his moralisings. And in fairness we must remember that he was writing principally for the students of the seminary founded by Claude and the life story being written is for their edification. He places this slip from the highest moral standards of behaviour as being the result of the uncontrolled freedom thrust on him while doing his university studies in Nantes, i.e., after 1698 instead of in 1697 when Claude was still a student at St. Thomas'. He was then eighteen and a half, old enough to be allowed travel to Nantes with a fellow student. They travelled on horseback whereas their luggage was carried by the public coach. Claude, as the son of the Juge-Garde, had the legal right to carry a sword and it would appear that this was not altogether for appearances in those days of frequent attacks by highwaymen.

First let us hear what Fr. Thomas has to say about this fall from grace on the part of his hero though the narrative reveals more about the writer than about his subject.

It was agreed that he should go to Nantes to study there. Beyond all this young des Places wanted more freedom. He did not foresee that his love of freedom was to become for him a source of the deepest regret and the bitterest remorse.

This last sentence makes our ears prick. What could be referred to here? When commenting on the retreat made by Claude at the end of the school year Fr. Thomas added:

After it (a retreat) he remained faithful to his good resolutions for a considerable length of time for a young man of honour who had such high ideals of virtue but also at the same time was exposed to the bad example, the conversations and the ridicule of the freedom-loving students who were his friends. It is not enough to make good resolutions and courageously to put them into practice. One has to persevere till the end, for it is on this that the crown and salvation depend. Young des Places persevered only forty days.

This laconic phrase stimulates our curiosity further. It seems Fr. Thomas is about to spill the beans when he goes on to say:

We come now to the most humiliating phase of Claude's life. God forbid, that I should suppress it. The honesty I must practise as a historian would of itself suffice to prevent such a course. Moreover, it may be useful for my readers to be shown how dangerous it is for one who has not yet left behind him the fiery passions of youth, to be left to his own counsel, no matter how excellent the education he may have previously received.

Still in suspense we tolerate Fr. Thomas's moralising in the hopes that he is going to deliver the goods. But he goes on:

Those who have not yet emerged from those critical years can draw from this account a lesson in prudence, others who have fallen will learn to do penance and correct their ways. Others who have preserved their moral integrity will give thanks to God, or combine gratitude with penance following Claude's example.

By now we should be getting to the juicy facts; but not so Fr. Thomas! He once again waffles on into vague generalities!

Finally everyone can find here an opportunity for edification, for it will be seen how in later life he came to regard a behaviour that would not have seemed irregular in the eyes of the world. They will see how he did penance for his faults, zealously endeavoured to restore to God the honour he had stolen from Him through his sins, and recognise that God can make even sins serve His glory and can turn evil into good for the sinner, as St. Augustine remarked, following the words of St. Paul: 'To those who love God, all things co-operate unto good'.¹⁴

All very pious, but one cannot but feel let down after all that build-up. Fr. Thomas goes on then to speak of life at Nantes as if there was nothing further to add. So the mystery remains unsolved.

When we turn to Claude's own notes we find the mystery even deepens. Contrary to his normal habit he refers to some incident in his life which seems to bear out the facts that Fr. Thomas shirked describing. He writes as follows:

He (God) worked miracles for me. So as to attract me to himself he closed his eyes to an enormous crime which constituted my crowning iniquity, committed as it was at the very time when he was exerting his greatest pressure to bring about my conversion. Far from resenting it he used it to touch my heart. His excessive patience began to pierce my very soul. I would not have hesitated any further had I dared hope for that which in his goodness he did for me, but which I had no reason to expect from him. All I need do is to recall it here without putting it down on paper. Only God and my heart ought never to forget this, his most startling act of mercy ever: God, so as to exact an act of gratitude without parallel; my heart, so as to love forever and exclusively such a bounteous benefactor.¹⁵

These lines were written some years later when Claude had advanced in the ways of prayer and intimacy with the Lord, when even the smallest failings in the love of God and one's neighbour were seen in a different perspective from that of the ordinary Christian who is not over-worried, provided his conscience does

not accuse him of grievous sin. Claude's language here is reminiscent of the Confessions of St. Patrick who also, when on the point of giving some longed-for details of his personal life, pulls himself up saying, "It would be tedious to relate", and goes on to talk about the eternal truths of the mercy and love of God! But we, living in an age when biographical details have taken over from those eternal verities even in the lives of our saints, feel entitled to search through Claude's revelations of himself to seek out, as it were, for his Achilles' heel, on his own admission. The majority of people would suspect that it is some sin of sex that Claude and Fr. Thomas are referring to, especially as the latter quoted from Saint Augustine at that juncture. But a perusal of Claude's confession would seem to give the lie to that suspicion. Claude never at any time accuses himself of any misdemeanours in that direction and even states that the Lord had preserved him from pronounced temptations of the flesh. His predominant passion was the search for glory, the desire to excel. Listen to his own words as he tries before God to examine his inner self in an effort to find God's will for him in his choice of career.

I seek independence and yet am a slave of '*grandeur*'. I am afraid of death, and therefore a coward, but one that is unable to meet with patience a marked affront. I am sober in the matter of pleasures of the palate and tastes, and rather reserved in the matter of pleasures of the flesh.¹⁶

His last sentence speaks for itself, but the remark, "unable to meet with patience a marked affront" seems to square with what Père Michel has unearthed from the dust of the out-of-court settlements that have kept their secrets for centuries. Since it is to Père Michel's diligent researches we owe this incident let us give him the honour of relating it:

The morning of October 8th 1697 Mr. Poullart des Places presented himself accompanied by two notaries of the Crown at the inn L'Hostellerie du puits Mauger which still stands in the rue de Nantes. The three men entered the room occupied by Pierre Le Huedez, a coachman from Batz, a small townland in the diocese of Nantes. Le Huedez had just brought a charge before the Criminal Court of Rennes 'against two private individuals, one of whom, dressed in brown doublet and mounted on a black horse, had stabbed him with a sword through the arm and had inflicted a flesh wound on his body'.

He agreed to cede to Mr. des Places all rights 'to pursue the extension of the aforesaid charge, and never to revoke this ceding of his rights on whatever pretext possible'. In exchange for this surrogation des Places would pay the coachman sixty pounds and engage himself to pay for the medical expenses of the treatment till fully cured. He also engaged himself to pay all expenses already incurred in connection with this criminal charge. As soon as the contract was signed he repaired to the judge to withdraw the charge made by Le Huedez and so left not the slightest trace on the criminal records of the courts.¹⁷

Who could this unnamed youth "dressed in the brown coloured doublet" be for whom Mr. des Places, Juge Garde des Monnaies, leading merchant and otherwise public and respected personality, would so demean himself to try to extricate him from the grips of the law? There seems to be only one explanation. As some students were travelling between Rennes and Nantes, their luggage going by coach while they rode separately on their own or hired mounts and sporting their swords, a dispute arose; one of the students, who considered his dignity affronted by the

coachman, drew his sword and lunged out at him because "he is unable to meet with patience a marked affront".

As Père Michel remarks, echoing the very comment made by Fr. Thomas about the dreadful behaviour of his hero which he does not dare mention, most of the other students would not have been in the least shocked by being involved in such an incident. In fact, they might even boast of it later in the telling. Yet even though the university students of the period were frequently involved in sword fights among themselves and with a defenceless public, and occasionally appeared in the court for it, Claude's father just could not afford to give the opportunity to some of his sworn legal enemies to have this case subjected to their tender mercies. This was all the more vital just then as he was involved in a major legal battle with the local authorities who wanted to coerce him into assuming the onerous but economically unrewarding office of Provost of St Yves Hospital. What he did not know as yet was that the previous day, 8 October 1697, the hoped for royal injunction in his favour had been given in Paris!

Presuming that Claude is the young gentleman in this incident, we can well imagine that the experience had a salutary effect on him at the time. That the significance of this lesson deepened with time is clear from what he wrote himself later and from what he confided to others. And most remarkable, it was a similar such incident in the life story of his model, Fr. Michael Le Nobletz, which may well have helped convince Claude about the particular type of priesthood the Lord expected him to opt for.

Père Le Floch believes that Claude made another short trip, to visit his friend Grignion de Montfort. Grignion had left Rennes for Paris in the autumn of 1693. Montfort is on the route from Rennes to Montcontour, Claude's father's native place. Grignion's family may have returned to their native place near Montfort some 15 miles away. He had kept up correspondence with his uncle, Fr. Robert de La Visnelle, attached to the church of Saint-Sauveur and living beside the des Placeses. One can be sure that Claude would have been anxious to be kept posted on his friend's progress at Paris and the deeply spiritual tenor of these letters could not but have had their effect on his outlook on life.

How often Grignion returned to Brittany during holiday time is not clear but that he did return once is certain – at least to the family home in the parish of Iffendie near Montfort where his people still kept the family farm of quite sizeable proportions. Here several of Grignion's friends came to visit and consult him on matters spiritual. One such friend, Fr. Blain, a former schoolmate at Rennes, put his recollections on record. There is actually no record of Claude having made the trip but it would have been the natural thing for him to have done once he knew Grignion was in that vicinity. From the subsequent close co-operation between the two in Paris and from the references made to their close friendships in earlier years, it seems almost necessary to postulate some other contacts than those which happened prior to Grignion's departure to Paris when Claude would have been only fourteen and a half. Claude and Grignion would have much more in common at this stage than in the earlier years as Claude was now in the middle of his philosophical studies.

STUDENT OF THE YEAR

On the feast of St. Luke, October 1697, as the academic year began at St. Thomas' College, this was his final year at school for Claude and in every sense the climax. Fr. Thomas wrote: "It would be impossible for me to explain in detail the wonderful education which Claude's parents imparted to him and the progress

he made in his studies. I know only that he fulfilled their expectations on both scores". This was true all along the line but more spectacularly in this his final year at St Thomas'. He now brought to bear on his studies the result of his years of practice at concentration on the work in hand to the exclusion of all distractions. His intensive study of rhetoric helped him in the many disputations which were the test of the students' grasp of the philosophical lore they had learned in the lecture hall and from their text books. As the year progressed it became clear that Claude was indeed the leader of his class. To sift out the leader was of importance to the professor and to the school as on this choice would depend so much at the great day at the close of the academic year when the school went on show and on trial before the invited elite of the town and, in a sense, of the province, as Rennes housed the institutions of the province.

The big day in the school year consisted in a public disputation ranging over the whole course of Philosophy taught at the school and the central figure was the student chosen to present his thesis, namely a clear and succinct statement of the principal tenets of his professor's teaching i.e. Fr. Prévost. He had then to answer the objections put by attackers. A formidable task for any student but the most coveted award sought after by all students was to be that one chosen to represent his school.¹⁸ It would be a great day in the life of the student certainly, but also a red-letter day in the history of his family. As it was also a very important matter for the school, great care went into the eventual choice. He must be not merely the leader in matters academic but also a worthy representative from the point of view of behaviour and public address.

In fact the student so chosen was almost invariably the president of the Academy of the school and the prefect of the Sodality of Our Lady. Seldom could there have been a more worthy choice than Claude Poullart.¹⁹ He was possessed of the intellectual brilliance, the solid scholarship, the assured and graceful public address and he was widely known to be a model in his behaviour in and out of the home, and, most surprisingly perhaps, because he was popular with his fellow students and with his teachers. Finally Claude had the backing of wealth, and that mattered because the lavish display put on for such an occasion was at the expense of the family. By this time, as Fr. Thomas tells us, Mr. des Places was a rich man "whose wealth multiplied daily". And though he was not a man to waste money, he knew how to do it big when the occasion required. This was a dream occasion presented to him as a doting father and as a shrewd public figure. Mr. des Places literally went to town on it! As Fr. Thomas put it: "The financial outlay on this event was extraordinary". As was the custom, placards and posters announcing the event and the subject of the thesis were put up all round the town.

Printed copies of the thesis itself were prepared and circulated beforehand to those who expressed the wish to challenge the defendant during the proceedings. These included not merely the students, philosophers and theologians, but members of the teaching staff, members of the religious orders in the town – some of them Doctors of the Sorbonne, and others of the educated fraternity who looked forward to participation in this open forum. Of course it was not a mere free-for-all from the floor of the house. The proceedings followed a time-honoured protocol of formal objections and reply with a chairman to see the rules were observed.²⁰ There were also elaborate programmes for all invited. But above all there was the artistically ornamented scroll from which the defendant read his thesis before the assembled audience. This was usually done on vellum by a firm in Paris who specialised in such artistic scrolls and who imprinted on them the portrait of the personage to whom the thesis was dedicated. In this case a very special effort was called for as the personage in question was none other than His

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L'on manda de Rennes en Bre-
tagne du 14 de ce mois, que
M^r Desplaces Poulart le Fils y
a soutenu une tres belle The-
se dédiée à Monsieur le Com-
te de Thoulouse, Gouverneur
de la Province. L'Assem-
blée fut tres illustre, tant à
cause de M^r du Parlement qui
s'y trouverent, que d'un tres-
grand nombre de personnes
de qualité, & autres Gens de
merite & de distinction, qui
vinrent entendre avec une
joye extrême les loüanges de
ce grand Prince. Le lieu choisi
pour cette ceremonie es-



Comte de Toulouse, son of Louis XIV,
to whom Claude dedicated his thesis

Extract from *Le Mercure Galant*,
November 1698, dealing with Claude's
defense of his thesis



Portrait of Claude by Jouvenet

Highness le Comte de Toulouse, the son of Louis XIV, who had been appointed two years previously Governor of Brittany! This was considered a very apt choice as the Comte was but a year senior to Claude and had already proved himself in battle to be no mere figurehead. But one can be sure the choice had been cleared at the proper channels as a matter of courtesy. Who the intermediary was is not recorded. One need only think of the de Marbeufs and the Ferrets. And one can be sure the college authorities needed little coaching in such matters. The choice of this particular patron was the main reason why this school event, which took place, 25 August 1698, received such extensive coverage, 3 pages, in the November issue of *Le Mercure Gallant*, the social and personal gazette of the period. As it is the only contemporary mention in print of Claude Poullart traced to date it is worth quoting from.

Le Mercure Gallant, November 1698:

We have received this report from Rennes in Brittany for the fourteenth of this month that Mr. des Places Poullart, junior, defended a very good thesis there which he dedicated to le Comte de Toulouse, Governor of the province. There was a very distinguished assembly, including members of Parliament and a large number from among the nobility as well as others of high rank and distinction, all of whom came to hear with obvious joy the praises sung of this great Prince.

The place chosen for the ceremony was richly adorned with tapestries and a platform was erected on which stood a magnificent dais covered in crimson relieved with gold. On this was placed an armchair and a magnificent stand on which was placed the thesis which was on satin framed in gold and enriched with many mementoes of the exalted office of Admiral of France with which the Comte de Toulouse is vested.

The thesis was introduced by Mr. de Guersan, Councillor au Parlement, whose oration was greeted with sustained applause. Then the defender of the thesis made his pronouncement in a very spirited manner.

So many people came forward then to challenge this thesis and to pay tribute to the heroes in whose honour this festival was being kept, that it would take eight full days for the defendant to reply to all their objections. But one can safely say in praise of this young philosopher that if he were keenly attacked his defence was more brilliant still. His solutions appeared so ingenious and delivered with such grace and ease that he aroused the admiration of all who heard him . . .²¹

The traditional prize awarded to the philosophy student of the year in Jesuit schools was a handsome leatherbound volume of the works of Cicero. The splendid portrait by Jouvenet commissioned on this occasion depicts Claude in an assured pose, dressed in the Jesuit school uniform, and clasping the coveted trophy.

The richly ornate scroll containing the thesis or Grand Act was a highly honoured treasure kept by the family. One presumes that Claude left it as a souvenir to his mother and in that case it must have perished with all the family papers in the great fire which wiped out so much of Rennes in 1720. The prizes which he brought with him to Paris, and which were treasured there in the Seminary which he founded, are presumed to have been lost in the Revolution.

A Hectic Summer

An Appointment at Versailles

One can well imagine that Claude was the talk of the town after his brilliant and graceful performance and his being feted at local parties as a coveted guest. That his fame went beyond Rennes was assured by the honourable mention in the *Mercure Gallant*. It seems that his performance was noted in court circles in Versailles. Most likely a copy of the ornate scroll had been sent to his royal highness, Le Comte de Toulouse, and one is not surprised that someone arranged for his appearance at the Court in Versailles. That he did go there is not in doubt, but the exact nature of his visit and the time are shrouded if not in mystery at least in the mist of time and the absence of sufficient documentation. Fr. Thomas refers to the incident thus:

“After he had finished Philosophy, his father judged it fitting that he made a trip to Paris. I would not be able to say exactly for what purpose”. He then goes on to quote from a memorandum submitted to him “by one of his students of the community in whom Fr. des Places had great confidence and to whom he communicated many details of his life”. He gathered from this document, no longer traceable, that it is thought that the main motive was to meet a high ranking young lady at the court of the Duchess of Burgundy who had been proposed as his future spouse! As it is estimated that the journey to Paris in those days would take five days both ways, and the undertaking was considered so risky in the troubled conditions of the country just then that persons who had to make the journey were advised to put their affairs in order before setting out, one thing we can be certain about is that Mr. des Places must have had some very weighty reasons for judging it fitting to allow Claude make this journey. And one presumes he was not allowed to go unaccompanied.¹

Whatever about the serious consideration being given to such a proposal of marriage, an introduction to the house of the Duchess of Burgundy would be considered to be something not to be turned down, however it came their way. The introduction may have been through Fr. Achille Gragé, then assistant director of the retreat house attached to St. Thomas' College; he was to succeed Bossuet as the Duchess's confessor. The Duchess, Marie Adelaide of Savoie, had the reputation of being a socialite, whereas her husband, the son of the Grand Dauphin, grandson of Louis XIV and therefore heir presumptive to the throne of France, was by all accounts a man who could pass for Claude's twin so well did he respond to tuition given him by Fénelon. An introduction to such surroundings was not to be turned down, but if the condition of his being retained was that he marry the lady-in-waiting, it was just not on either for his parents or for Claude. As to how he was thought of for such a proposed marriage in the first place, Fr. Thomas has this to say: “A young man with such admirable prospects, the only son of a wealthy father whose fortune was constantly on the increase, could not fail to receive frequent offers of marriage. Claude was on his guard against rash decisions”. So far so good, but in the absence of any concrete facts, and indeed Fr. Thomas does not overburden his readers with such details and never once

mentions a date, he launches into one of those moralistic comments at which he is most at home and which invariably tell us more about himself than about the subject of his biography. "He knew", he writes, "that one often regrets having taken on that burden and that one often finds in marriage a protracted torment instead of the peace and consolation that is sought in it. Consequently before engaging in that state he wanted to give it serious thought and seek counsel from God and men". He then goes on to depict Claude asking several married men if they were satisfied in that state and as all answered that they were, he changed the tactic and asked if they were free once more would they risk marriage a second time. Only one answered in the affirmative to the question put in this way! So Fr. Thomas resumes in his own inimitable way.

Young des Places had a keen mind and love did not blind him. He was on his guard against thoughtless commitments. Since his passion was for glory and renown, attaching oneself to a woman in marriage was rather an obstacle than a means to achieve his objective. Girls are all too often preoccupied with frivolous amusements and these held little attraction for him. He did not like the idea of yielding to the myriad whims and fancies that living peacefully with a wife would involve. He would have been more inclined to fight monsters with Hercules than allow himself to be overpowered by a woman to the extent of becoming her slave as the hero did.

So much for the misogynistic side of Fr. Thomas! How different from Claude's real reactions to the feminine behaviour of his younger sister about whom he remarks in his retreat notes that he can scarcely bear being separated from her for any length of time.

Fr. Thomas does finally put his finger on the real explanation for Claude's rejection of proposals of marriage.

Moreover he was often conscious again of the leaning toward the ecclesiastical state which he had felt since childhood, and God disposed all things according to his designs. It was easy for him to put aside the project which his parents could have arranged for him but which was contrary to his tastes.²

That Claude's parents ever seriously considered this proposal of marriage to a young lady they probably had not met is unlikely even if it opened the way to acquiring the coveted noble status. That they did not want him to take up life in the Court as a minor official is certain from what he says himself in his retreat notes later; and though these retreat notes belong to a later period in his development, namely after he had completed his law studies, it is not out of place to quote here what he says himself about his reactions to a life at Court as a possible career. We will then be on surer grounds than when listening to Fr. Thomas' moralising. As these retreat notes were never meant for publication and are merely a record of his reflections in the form of a dialogue with his own heart, there is no question of his giving any biographical details. But reading between the lines we may be able to detect his reaction to life at Court as he saw it during his short visit:

You would prefer court life to a military life, for example. A position in the king's service would appeal to you because it would give you satisfaction. Your life would always appear to be calm and peaceful. You would live now in one place, now in another. You would find scope for your political acumen, your gift of flattery and dissimulation, your human respect, your mildness and self-satisfaction, in a word for all the little gifts you imagine I have. In truth

nothing in the world would suit you better, so long as I do not take religion into consideration and am willing to gratify your passions. It is no good your telling me that you would not yield to your evil inclinations, that you would live there as elsewhere, like a gentleman, even like a good man. I can think of a thousand reasons you could invoke which would be quite eloquent, for this is greatly to your liking. If you were your own master you would not long remain undecided but would quickly opt for this state. To this I will answer by quoting an old proverb, 'Opportunity makes the thief'. You are too easy-going, you do not have the courage to resist persistent pressure. In a word you know I owe allegiance to my beloved parents who could not approve such a plan. Moreover I owe it to them never to do anything that is contrary to their will.³

These, the first words we have quoted from Claude's own hand, though never meant to be read by anyone except perhaps his retreat director, are like a breath of fresh air in their candour and common-sense. But they do nothing to solve the mystery of his visit to Court. That is why some of his more recent biographers have suggested that the visit to Paris may not be unconnected with a legal battle his father successfully fought against the authorities of the town – even against the Parlement de Bretagne, and this victory cannot easily be explained without some strong influence at the Council of State in the Court of Versailles.

Des Places senior did not normally need any one to fight his battles for him. He was a brilliant lawyer, a capable businessman, and had no qualms about acting when he saw action was called for, even if it meant being severe or running the risk of arousing opposition. His increasing wealth and the extension of his property deals were bound to arouse opposition in certain quarters too. When he successfully made his moves to secure the post of Juge-Garde des Monnaies it was not because of any income accruing from the post itself. It gave him certain privileges enjoyed by the nobility while leaving him entirely free to pursue his career as an *avocat du Parlement de Bretagne* and as a businessman. The great value of the post of a Juge-Garde was that it gave him freedom from taxation and exemptions from serving in other posts of public responsibility which could be burdensome but unrewarding financially. The extant documents show that the procedure by which des Places acquired the post of Juge-Garde in 1685 was no mere formality. As it was a highly responsible office in the financial government of the realm his character and background had to be investigated. It seems that des Places had to go all the way to Paris where one witness had to vouch for his being a good-living Catholic and a priest had to give evidence that he had seen him go to Confession and Holy Communion in Notre Dame in recent days. But it was not all a matter of piety. As the man he was succeeding is on record as having handed over the sum of 80,000 livres on acquiring the post we can be sure that des Places had to dig deep into the savings he had amassed over the years. But he was only too ready to pay up as he had made his calculations and was confident of an unlimited financial return in the years to come; and of course, the post was hereditary, provided he did no blot his copybook. All his legal acts as Juge-Garde were well documented and are there to be perused in state records.⁴

Mr. des Places was not the man to take his duties lightly or shirk a show-down. So when he discovered the craftsmen in contravention of the official regulations he had them pay a severe fine. They ganged up against him and as they had a voice in the Hôtel de la Ville they influenced the town council to have Mr. des Places made subject to the obligations of public service. As a start they proposed that he be nominated as provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves. This was again a non-remunerative post and one which entailed quite an amount of involvement

of one's own property in bailing out in situations that went wrong. They knew that as Juge-Garde he would claim immunity from obligation to undertake such charges, so they argued that it was never the intention of his majesty to exempt anyone from the service of the poor, that this was not so much a charge as an act of charity. Des Places countered that he had no intention of claiming exemption from doing works of charity but he was not willing to be put under compulsion to do this in contravention of the ancient privileges attached to the office of Juge-Garde des Monnaies by the Dukes of Brittany and confirmed since by so many royal injunctions including that of the reigning majesty and his predecessors. Further, he argued, the charge of provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves would involve so much time and trouble in the constant attendance to the needs of the poor that he would not be able to give his undivided attention to his post as Juge-Garde and that in consequence his majesty's service would suffer considerably.

Des Places won that round. He succeeded in obtaining an injunction from the Council of State on 28 May 1697 declaring him exempt from the enforced nomination as provost. But the municipal authorities appealed against the royal injunction through the intervention of the Parlement de Bretagne. They countered des Places' arguments by pointing out that none of the commoners can be exempt from the service of the poor and that it was in his capacity as merchant that des Places was being nominated; they argued that he had plenty of time to carry on a wholesale commerce in cloth, wax, corn, cattle, etc. from which he had acquired property in the town to the value of 50,000 écus (150,000 livres), that it was common knowledge that he carried on twenty lines of business which occupied him far more than the post of Juge-Garde and that this occupation did not interfere with the performance of his official duties. They concluded by asserting that of all the merchants in Rennes he was the best placed to cope with maintaining the necessary supply of ready cash to tide the hospital through its current demands.⁵

It would appear at this stage of the legal battle that des Places had his back to the wall and that the Parlement de Bretagne had won the day. It was at this juncture, as already noted, that Mr. des Places had to present himself early in the day at L'Hostellerie du Puits Mauget, together with two royal notaries, to negotiate a vital and costly out-of-court settlement in favour of Claude. That was 9 October 1697. Unknown to him as yet the legal decision in his favour had been made the previous day at Paris. The royal injunction of 8 October 1697 directed that the former injunction of 31 May be executed in favour of the Juge-Garde des Monnaies. The official notification of the Arrêt of the Council of State was signed by Le Comte de Philipeaux de Pontchartrain, Controller General of Finances in the State. Le Comte de Pontchartrain before being appointed to the post of Controller General had spent 10 years in Rennes as first President of the Parlement de Bretagne. It is to be taken for granted that he had been close to des Places and his set, the Marbeufs and Ferrets, and had some reason to be favourable to them. We can only surmise. So when Fr. Thomas wrote about Claude that "his father judged it fitting that he make a trip to Paris", it may well have been connected with his father's own great matter and that all the talk about a proposal of marriage was but a smoke-screen.

Whether Claude was or was not in any way involved in the carrying of any message to the Court about this matter we shall probably never know. But one thing is certain: he was deeply concerned in that the whole purpose of Mr. des Places's intense involvement in all this commerce and money-making was to put Claude in possession of a fortune and a post that would leave the world open to him, once he was ready to step into his father's place. It is not clear how Mr. des Places hoped to secure the desired status of nobility for his son once he had qualified as

an *avocat*, but keeping in close touch with people that mattered at the Court in Versailles was part of the strategy. When the opportune time came for submitting a petition for a title of nobility, the way would have been well prepared by these contacts. It was taken for granted that that was what Claude himself would want. It was never dreamt of for a moment that he would do other than he had always done, i.e. fall in with his good parents' plans for him. But no human being is to be totally programmed. In spite of his docility and compliance with his parents' will, Claude had a mind of his own, and even though it would take some time yet before he could fully discover his own real mind, it had become clear that he had no great inclination to follow in his father's footsteps and adopt his philosophy of life.

As a footnote to this visit of Claude to Paris and to the Court at Versailles one might ask in whose company did he make this journey and where did he stay while at the capital. As there were regular exchanges of personnel between the various Jesuit houses, and as we know that several who served at St Thomas' College also served in Paris both in Collège Louis-le-Grand, the provincialate house and in the novitiate, it is quite likely that Claude's trip would have been arranged to coincide with the travel arrangements of the Jesuits and that he would have received accommodation in one of their three communities at Paris. If so this would have been Claude's first introduction to those communities which were later to play such a determining role in his career.

Finally, if the portrait of Claude by Jean Jouvenet depicting him as the Young Philosopher of the Year clasping his volume of the speeches of Cicero was painted at the actual time (1698), then the only occasion the sitting could have been arranged with Jouvenet was during this visit to the capital. One suggestion put forward tentatively is that the commissioning of that portrait at this juncture may not have been unconnected with the stated purpose of his visit to Versailles, namely that proposal of marriage to one of the noble ladies in the entourage of the Duchess of Burgundy.⁶ In the absence of professional photographers there were many portrait-painters attached to the Court, and Jean Jouvenet is known to have made his mark at Versailles.

The actual sequence of events of Claude's life in 1698 is not easy to plot with certainty in the absence of dates and a logical development of mental states leading up to the actual decision. What does emerge from Fr. Thomas' generalised statements is that once Claude had finished school at the Jesuits, August 1698, he began to take a more active part in social life. It was to be expected that he would be feted widely in the wake of his success. He would be a marked and welcome figure at any party. Besides his manners and appearance made him a very sociable guest, a *cavalier accompli*, as Fr. Thomas describes him and one who charmed people *avec ses belles manières*. If one had a taste for social life there was plenty of it in Rennes. One has only to read the letters of Madame de Sévigné to get the impression that Rennes at all times seemed to be aping the manners and customs of Versailles, especially during the session of the États de Bretagne. The town was in one swing of parties. For a young man who had kept his head down at his books for so long and who had been carefully shielded from over-involvement in the fast tempo of this part of life, there was the danger that his sudden introduction to the heady life of the frivolous nobility would present too much of a temptation even to one so mature and well trained as Claude. And one gathers from Fr. Thomas' circumlocutions that Claude for a moment at least got bitten by the society bug:

It seems that Claude upon his return to Rennes (from Paris) played a greater role in social life. It was natural that he should be granted more freedom to

see the world than he had enjoyed up till then and that he should have been given the money required for making a dignified appearance. This was much to his taste. Consequently he was not stingy when opportunities arose. But since his parents shied away from prodigality, he had to move cleverly in order to arrange for borrowing and lending sums of money, and to hide behind a fair front whatever might have been irregular in his conduct. It is probably to this that Fr. des Places refers when he speaks of his hypocritical life. And it may also be these expenditures that he found recorded in the list I mentioned above.⁷

That list! How welcome such a contemporary document that would be to the biographer today and how pored over to see what insights its details might give into this challenging period of Claude's life; but unfortunately no such documents have survived and Fr. Thomas was not the sort to delay unduly over such trifles. What with parties, the theatre, public games, hunt-balls, etc., all claiming his attentions, Claude must certainly have been put to his wits end in his efforts to make his pocket money cover them all. And we must remember that he was not living in a vacuum, that he had to live on the level of his own age group. As Fr. Thomas puts it, "He was exposed to the bad example, the conversations and the ridicule of the freedom-loving students who were his friends".

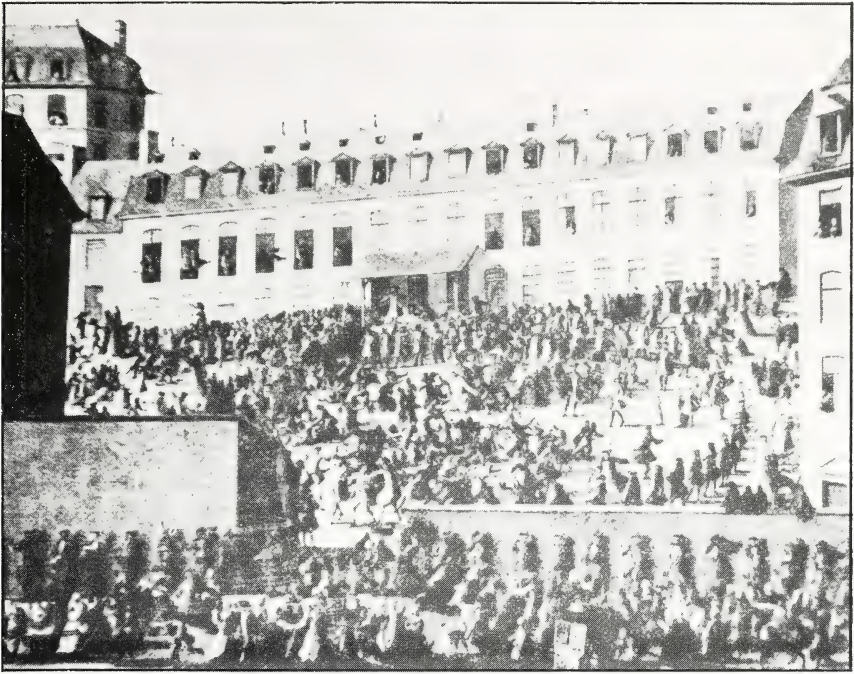
How long this period of hectic social life lasted is not clear. What is certain is that he decided to do a retreat. It may well be that this retreat was a routine part of school life at Saint-Thomas' to help people to prepare for their entry into their chosen career. There was a retreat-house attached to most big Jesuit schools to provide not merely for the needs of the students but also to cater for the members of the Sodality which embraced past students from every walk of life. These continuous retreats were looked on as a reinforcement of the 'missions' being preached throughout Brittany in the 17th century by a number of zealous priests, mostly Jesuits. Such a retreat house was founded in Rennes in 1675 by Fr. Jean Jégou. He would have been well known to Claude as he remained on as director for over twenty years. As the work grew more demanding he was given as helper Fr. Achille Gruvé. It was he who was to be appointed confessor to the Duchess of Burgundy in 1701, in succession to Bossuet; and so it has been suggested that he may have been already well known to the Duchess and that it was through him that Claude got his introduction to the Court at Versailles. But at this moment Claude is concerned with the affairs of his soul.

The retreat notes written by Claude which have survived belong to a later period. We have no record of what went on in his mind at this juncture, apart, that is, from the decision he announced to his startled parents at the end of it.

A SHOCK ANNOUNCEMENT

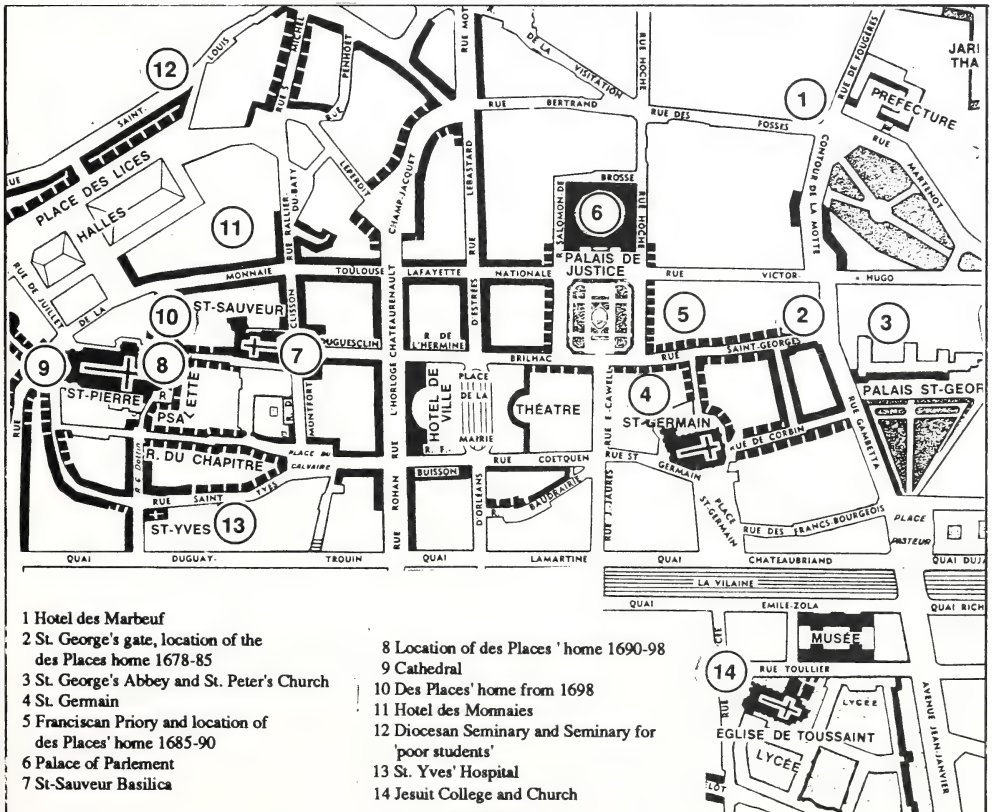
In the absence of any notes from Claude himself about this important retreat, we quote from Fr. Thomas who not merely knew Claude at close hand but had access to personal papers no longer extant and had questioned others at the Seminary in Paris who had been in close contact with Claude as director:

However that may be it is certain that at that time he felt he should make a retreat. He may have desired to strengthen his piety, or again, having been brought up in the fear of God and the realisation of how God's goodness and sweetness rewards those who serve Him, he may have quickly experienced remorse whenever he did something that was even slightly out of order. He had begun the retreat not only to strengthen himself in piety but perhaps even



Hotel des Monnaies where Claude's father presided

Map of Rennes showing places associated with Claude



more to examine carefully before God the state of life to which he was called. Probably it was then that he acquainted his parents with his design to embrace the clerical state and he asked their permission to go and study at the Sorbonne in Paris.⁸

Whether this decision to opt for the priesthood came suddenly to Claude or was merely the formulation of what were unspoken desires all along deep under the surface, we don't know, but the announcement of it at this stage must have been nothing short of a thunderbolt for his parents, especially for his father. Apart entirely from his long term plans about Claude's taking a seat in the Parlement de Bretagne as conseiller and his succeeding to the post of Juge-Garde des Monnaies, a post which was hereditary, there was the recent big expansion in their commercial undertakings.

They had been living since 1690 in rue Saint-Sauveur. This street, which had seen the development of Claude from boyhood to manhood, was bounded on one side by the Basilica of Saint-Sauveur and on the other side by the Cathedral, the des Places home being in the shadow of both and palpably feeling their influence. Now there were big changes afoot for the family. There was first a change of house. At last they were moving into their own new spacious premises built to the requirements of Mr. des Places beside their new big business complex and within a few paces of his offices in the Hotel des Monnaies on the other side of the street. Money was no object in the design of their mansion and from the map of Rennes drawn up after the Great Fire of 1720 we can gauge exactly the extent of the ground space bought over by des Places down the years. He had the right also to dispose of the living quarters set aside in the Mint complex for the Juge Garde and his family; these he made over to his partner in that office, Gilles, Joseph Serpin, Sr. de La Rochardiere.⁹

The rue Saint-Sauveur from which the des Places were moving now and the rue de la Cordonnerie (i.e. rue de la Monnaie today) formed as it were two legs of the letter U with the short street of rue Saint-Guillaume connecting them. The courtyard and gardens at the rear of the houses in rue Saint Sauveur were adjoining those along the corresponding stretch of rue de la Cordonnerie. Des Places senior had by this time bought out much of the frontage of rue Saint Guillaume, and a sizeable portion of the frontage of rue de la Cordonnerie; and, having demolished the old buildings he constructed three-storey warehouses, coach-houses, and stables to cater for horses needed to transport their merchandise. All this was to cope with their greatly extended trade in cloth, mostly linen and special fabrics bought in monopoly deals with agents who lived out among the weavers in the various areas of Brittany, famous at that time for their fabrics. Notable among them was the area where des Places senior had originated, Montcontour in the Saint Brieuc region, and where as we have seen he brought Claude the previous year on what must have been a working holiday. Claude's mother, of course, was not standing idly by in all these extensions and developments. Her years as governess for the Marbeufs, and her contact with the various localities where they owned property and chateaux, stood her in good stead both in buying and marketing what was of quality in the more expensive type of fabrics sought after by the dress-conscious gentry.

Now they were at the peak of their fortunes and were looking forward to the new chapter in the des Places story when, like their friends, the Ferrets du Tymeur, they could, as it were, buy their way back into the ranks of nobility and gradually hand over their empire to their brilliantly successful heir. Then he confronted them with the announcement that he was not at all interested in this role being cut out for him,

that he was on the contrary opting for the priesthood and that he wanted to be sent to the Sorbonne in Paris to pursue his studies there. One can but sympathise with Claude's parents. Suddenly their gold must have turned to ashes, and the great sacrifices they had made so willingly over the years now seemed to have been all in vain. Deep as was their faith one can imagine them complaining bitterly to the Lord and having to suppress feelings of aversion for the priesthood which seemed set to shatter their dreams.

Claude no doubt had his own special concept of the priesthood at this stage. Fresh as he was from his studies of rhetoric and philosophy, and intoxicated perhaps by his own oratorical brilliance, the models he had of the priesthood were men such as Bossuet and Bourdaloue, both past students of Jesuit schools, who were famous as church orators and whose appearances in the pulpits of great churches were as much sought after as the shows in the theatre of the time. A few years later, when Claude tried to come face to face with his inner self as he followed the stages of an Ignatian retreat, he realised that his interest in the priesthood might well be badly tainted by his deep desire for glory and acclaim. In his revealing retreat notes we find him addressing his inner self as follows:

I know you are much drawn to clerical life. I do not blame you for this bent, provided I am convinced you have the right intention, namely God's glory and the longing to secure your own salvation. It is true that there are signs of this intention, but I notice many other motives. I am convinced you would like me to make this choice so as to convert souls to God, to remain more regular in the practice of virtue, to be in a better position to do good, and to give alms to the poor more generously. Such a scheme is worthy of praise and contains all I would ask of you so as to approve your choice. Yet tell me honestly is that the only reason you have for wanting to see me serve in the Church? Will not vanity itself, your dominant passion, become the real reason for your vocation? You flatter yourself with the thought that my preaching will be greeted with applause and thus glory and honour will be yours. This is where you are most vulnerable for, if I agree to become a priest on the condition that I never mount a pulpit, you will never give your consent. What then will be my decision?¹⁰

In the official document confirming des Places in the post of Juge Garde we are informed that he was known for his *suffisances . . . prud'homme, expérience . . .* In other words, this self-made man, did not get where he had got without a lot of horse-sense and shrewd knowledge of human nature as well as civil law. He read Claude's motives better than Claude himself did at the time. When they got over the initial shock of the announcement they did not lose their heads and openly oppose Claude's decision. Being practising Christians, there must have been some real happiness that God had so inspired their son to choose the better part; they knew also that to oppose his decision directly was bad psychology. Perhaps, too, his decision might yet only be the first phase of youthful idealism which would give way in time to the realities of life as they saw it. So when Claude asked his parents for their permission to go back to Paris to study theology, this is how they reacted according to Fr. Thomas:

Monsieur and Madame des Places were too religious to oppose their son's vocation, but thought it expedient to put his constancy to the test. However, their plans did not agree with his. Claude's father was richly endowed with worldly possessions and he wanted his son to become Counsellor of Brittany's Parliament. He had hoped that his son in whom he could see so many excellent

qualities would restore to his family the ancient standing it had lost through a disagreement between a mother-in-law in the des Places relationship and her sons-in-law.

“His parents argued therefore that to be well-trained and to become a priest it was not necessary for him to study in Paris or to be a doctor from the Sorbonne. It was enough to be learned. ‘I don’t know any doctors’, observed his father, ‘who preach much better than the others’. This reply did not suit des Places junior. It meant that he would have to study theology at Rennes but that was not to his liking. His clerical aspirations were not pure enough to preclude a desire for more liberty than proximity to parental supervision would inevitably have accorded him.¹¹

To understand the significance of that last remark we have to keep in mind that compulsory seminary attendance was not yet accepted as part of the normal preparation for the priesthood. Until within a certain period before receiving major orders there was no obligation, no facility even, for aspirants to the priesthood to receive seminary training. Legislation was coming into force gradually determining the length of this obligatory period of seminary attendance but it varied from place to place according to the facilities available. In Rennes itself what happened was that students did their theology at the Jesuit college or with the Dominicans; they boarded in hostels, as did the lay students, except those who like Claude lived nearby. This is what Grignon de Montfort was doing until he was offered a free place at Paris. And the same applied to Claude’s close associate Michael Vincent Le Barbier whom we will meet later as Claude’s right hand man in Paris. So the prospects for Claude then would be to continue his studies at Saint-Thomas’ while residing at home until within a year or so of ordination. Then it would be obligatory for him to attend the senior diocesan seminary which was opened by St. John Eudes and his society at Rennes in 1672. This seminary, situated just a few minutes walk from the des Places’ new house, was not a seminary in the full sense in that it did not teach theology, but rather concentrated on the spiritual formation of the aspirants as they approached the priesthood. The students continued their attendance as externs at the Jesuits or Dominicans. This set-up did not at all appeal to Claude’s tastes. He preferred to make a clean break with the home situation which might cramp his style as it were. Luckily an ideal solution was hit on – a solution in which with the benefit of hindsight we can now see the hand of providence. But for the simple statement of the solution itself let us turn to Fr. Thomas:

It was agreed that he should go to Nantes to study there. This choice was in perfect accord with the designs of both parents and their son. In this way he would also have a chance to let his vocation mature. The study of law was required of all who wanted to become counsellors with Parliament. It was likewise useful for those who desired to enter the clerical state. Beyond all this, young des Places wanted more freedom.¹²

Nantes, Law Student

1698-1701

Rennes was the capital of Brittany: it was the seat of the provincial parliament and the Etats des Bretagne held their sessions there. But Nantes from time to time challenged Rennes for the honour of being the real capital. It was after all the main port through which the province's trade passed. Above all it was the university town.

The University of Nantes, like all the main seats of higher education in the late middle ages, owed its origins to a papal charter. The Bull issued by Pius II in 1460 states that Nantes was chosen

because it was the most fertile region of the province, because also of its being built on the river Loire which was navigable for the length of 200 miles, and because it was in communication with the rest of France by sea, because this happy position made it ideally suited to encourage studies, also the purity of the air there and easy communications with men of learning in other lands, etc.¹

It is interesting to note that a generation after Claude's time somewhat similar reasons were cited as motives for changing the law school from there as they were not conducive to the serious application to the real business of a university, namely, study! And by that time Rennes was considered the more appropriate site for the law school. But when Claude set off for Nantes in October 1698 the University of Nantes was secure in its position as the intellectual centre of the province. It comprised the four faculties of Theology, Law, Arts and Medicine. The Law Faculty was considered to be the most important.

Scarcely any hard facts about Claude's studies at Nantes have been recorded, which is unfortunate as it must have been a very formative period in his development. We have of course the usual generalities from Fr. Thomas, and a paragraph or so in Claude's retreat notes which almost certainly refer to this period. As these will take on more flesh and blood after a look at the general scene as known from other sources we leave them for quoting later.

It is not known where Claude stayed while in Nantes but it is possible that he lodged with relatives of the family on the mother's side, and Claude's visit to Nantes the previous year was presumably a contact for him with his relatives or family friends through business. It would have been such a welcome help to us if some letters written by Claude during this period to his parents or to his sister had survived, but the great fire of 1720 destroyed the family records.

It was a three-year course for the Licentiate in Law. The first two years were devoted to a course in civil and canonical law, to which was added a course in French law. During his first year he would have followed the lectures of the two professors who gave commentaries on the Code of Canon Law and the Justinian code. Knowing Claude to have been a natural student we can imagine that he took his studies seriously, more than was said for a number of his companions. Indeed the law students in particular had a very bad reputation for being interested in almost all the aspects of life in this great seaport except the technicalities of law. This can be read between the lines in the royal ordonnance which eventually transferred the school of law to Rennes in 1735 where it states:

The authorities in the Parliament and all those connected with the legal profession would be in a better position to supervise not merely the studies of their children but their behaviour and morals instead of being obliged as at present to send them to study at Nantes where they are left to shift for themselves at an age when they are too immature as yet, and where they neglect their studies and are exposed to all the occasions of dissipation and unruly behaviour that are associated with a place frequented by so many foreigners, etc.²

Other sources are much more explicit in their castigation of the low level of legal knowledge displayed by those attempting to practise law, fresh from their studies and their antics. It is alleged that they spent far more time at the theatre, where by law they were allowed as students a certain limited number of free passes, and at the marionette shows. To quote a contemporary:

Instead of being locked in intellectual conflict with their professors in the halls of learning, they are engaged in brawls, in fist fights, even in sword fights on the streets and at the outskirts of the town.³

It is with this background in mind, and much more besides, that the generalities and the moralisings of Fr. Thomas take on a new dimension:

Until now young des Places had lived under rather close supervision. His father and mother excused him from nothing that was of consequence. In person or through tutors they gave him all the training needed for his upbringing. Being unable to follow him to Nantes, they were forced to leave him to his own devices. His father was widely known and probably had friends in Nantes also. It is only twenty leagues away from Rennes. It is likely that he earnestly commended his son to some of them. But friends are rarely watchful enough and do not take note of everything against which a young man should be warned. And, after all, a young man is no longer to be treated like a child. He is supposed to be able to take care of himself in public, especially when he is a law student. Young des Places was then about eighteen years old, and he displayed all the physical and mental attainments one could desire; he was rather well built . . . (sentence unfinished).

Claude lived among a great number of young men of good social standing who had come from the provinces to study law at Nantes. Their intentions were similar to his own. At Rennes he had only passing contacts with them. Now he felt he had money to spend and could cut a good figure in the world. His eagerness to make friends and establish advantageous relations caused him to become more and more involved in worldly affairs. He found resistance hard and, since he lacked experience, he failed to perceive the dangers he ran.⁴

Well, what should Claude have done about all this? Fr. Thomas goes on from his ivory tower, as if he were repeating the notes he had used so often in his conferences to the aspirants to the priesthood in the seminary founded later by Claude:

Claude in order to preserve the good dispositions he had formed during his retreat, should have risen above the esteem and the contempt of the world, and especially above the respect of dissolute young men. He should have despised their discourses and their railleries. But he lacked the courage to do so. He

should have recalled the great truths he had meditated on during the retreat. He should have sought the advice of wise persons, practised spiritual reading, and sought solitude occasionally.⁵

Sermonising as all this sounds in the face of a flesh and blood situation, Fr. Thomas may have been nearer the facts than he realised, as we shall presently see; but he was certainly much nearer the truth when he goes on to state that what kept Claude straight in the long run was not so much the spiritual advice he received from preachers or retreats or from spiritual books, as from the sound traditions of his family upbringing which were part of his own moral and spiritual fibre. We leave the last word with Fr. Thomas:

It was fortunate for him that he had received a good upbringing. All the counsels of a father and of a virtuous mother who loved him and whom he loved tenderly in return were not soon to be wiped out, and God's grace had not abandoned him.

Later when Claude himself looked back on those years and on the remarkable manner in which he had surmounted the temptations which he had so vividly felt, he had no hesitation in attributing his preservation to the grace of God. We look in vain of course for any concrete details as his "confession" is not the proud or even the penitent enumeration of his own exploits but a confession in sense used by St. Patrick, i.e. a profession of gratitude for God's mercy and His grace. This is how he writes in his retreat notes:

. . . How well I remember those moments when, sad to say, I was ready to fall over the precipice, but God's hand arrested me and prevented my fall! How many times I found His grace blocking my road like an iron wall! Thousands of times my criminal efforts broke down against that wall and my course was deflected amidst my wanderings. Things offensive to God and so readily committed by others, I found hard to do. I do not exaggerate when I say that I found it almost impossible to do such things. Everything seemed to put obstacles in my way; places, times and persons were against me. It took me considerable trouble to commit sin. I had to arm myself with patience and courage to overcome so many enemies who desired only my good; I had to go to so much trouble that this alone was capable of repelling me from sin.⁶

Yes, it is God's grace which preserves one from sinning. But God usually uses external graces, very often the people with whom one comes in contact. Where Fr. Thomas wrote so blandly, "He should have sought the advice of wise persons, practised spiritual reading and sought solitude occasionally", he was of course right, and Claude being the solid and sensible sort most likely did that. In fact we can be morally certain he did. If there was any place in Nantes that Claude would gravitate towards it would be a house of the Jesuit Fathers, if there were such. He had been reared by them; they were his second family and he had always been on the best of relations with them in Rennes and at Caen. The Jesuits had a house in Nantes, in fact a very famous one which has carved for itself a special niche in the history of spirituality, and the director, Fr. de Rollivaud, was well known to Claude. He had been assistant retreat master at the retreat house attached to St. Thomas' school in Rennes from 1688 to 1696 and may well have been Claude's own spiritual director there. It would be only natural that he would have renewed this close contact.⁷ Though the Jesuits were in Nantes since 1661 it is not clear how extensive was their ministry apart from the retreat house they conducted at

Hotel de Briord. Delattre informs us that they had an influential Sodality of Our Lady and a *Bona Mors* society. As Claude had been closely involved in the sodality of Our Lady when attached to St. Thomas' College in Rennes and was soon to be part of the vital core of the sodality at Louis le Grand College in Paris, it would be out of character for him to opt out of this contact during his years in Nantes. Indeed the fact that he so readily adopted the special prayers of the sodality as his own personal prayers in his rule of life would seem to point to his continued association with the sodality. With regard to the other society run by the Jesuits at Nantes, the *Bona Mors*, it is interesting to find that Claude seems to have been very familiar with its attitude to preparation for death as is evidenced by the section he has on that topic in his rule for his seminarians.

The principal person in the retreat house at Nantes for many years was Fr. Peter Champion. He directed the retreats there from 1680 till his death in 1701, but the work for which his name lived on after his death was the publication over the years of a number of spiritual books which have remained the corner-stones of a school of spirituality down the centuries. Fr. Champion himself would be the first to disclaim all originality in his work. He was but publishing the teaching of others who had great influence on a marked spiritual renewal all over Brittany and Normandy for years. The principal figure in this school of spirituality was Fr. Louis Lallemant S.J. who died in 1635 and who had himself not committed any of his thoughts to writing but he had so influenced others at Paris and Rouen that the notes of his conferences were highly treasured and widely circulated. The main tenets of Fr. Lallemant's teaching appear to us today to be a perfectly orthodox part of Christian spirituality, namely the insistence on the importance of attaining purity of heart and the vital role of docility to the Holy Spirit in our lives; but in the heady days of the 17th century in France with its battles over Jansenism, Quietism, etc., new approaches in spirituality had to be broached gingerly. Besides, within the Jesuit order the lines laid down in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius were the orthodox path along which souls were to be guided, and this stress on the vital role of openness to the Holy Spirit was looked on as liable to misinterpretation, to say the least. But Fr. Lallemant's teaching, through the influence of his disciples Frs. Rigoleuc, Surin, Maunoir and Le Grand – most of whom were connected with Rennes' college at some stage of their career, had a dynamic influence on the preaching of the parish missions throughout Brittany. The band of priests – religious and secular, who were involved in this crusade of missions was called the Congregation of Priests of the Holy Spirit as a result of the influence of Fr. Lallemant's teaching on the role of the third person of the Blessed Trinity in the spiritual life of the ordinary Christian. For years, however, no one ventured to publish anything by the leaders in this movement or school of spirituality. At last Fr. Champion ventured into print. He began not with the master, Fr. Lallemant, but with a disciple, Fr. Rigoleuc who was better known locally. "*The spirituality of Fr. Rigoleuc*" appeared in 1688 and was a best-seller. The book was well known in the retreat house in Rennes, as Fr. Rigoleuc had been a student and later a regent there and many of the community had joined in preaching the parish missions throughout Brittany. Then in 1694 came the masterpiece, "*The Spiritual Teaching of Fr. Lallemant*", and though it did not equal the popularity of the first book it has remained ever since one of the classics of devotional literature. This was followed by the publication of the Spiritual letters of Fr. Surin, another member of this school who was actually attached to the retreat house in Nantes. Again his work has retained its place on the shelves of representative works on the spiritual life.⁸

So when Claude arrived at Nantes there was an air of excitement among those versed in the literature of the spiritual life. And if it was really true as related that he

was the grand-nephew of Fr. Guy Le Meneust he would have a special interest for Fr. Champion as he would be well aware that Fr. Le Meneust had been the revered master of novices of some of the leading members of this school of spirituality at Paris and at Rouen where Fr Lallemand had launched his spiritual teaching.⁹

The ripples of the movement reached beyond the readers of spiritual classics to the ordinary faithful via the foundation of sodalities of the Holy Spirit in parish churches and in colleges. For example, it is on record that a chapel in the church of Saint-Germain in Rennes, where the des Places family were parishioners from 1685-1690, was dedicated to the Holy Spirit and a sodality of the Holy Spirit was begun there in 1698 just as Claude was leaving for Nantes. There is evidence also that a sodality of the Holy Spirit was introduced into St. Thomas' College around the same time.¹⁰ Claude's being directed to Nantes at this time to do his law studies was considered by both himself and his parents as a happy solution to the problem which had arisen about his vocation; with the gift of hindsight we can safely say that this contact with Nantes just then had a providential relevance for the role the Lord had planned for him.

There were two other communities in Nantes at the time which may also have had some influence on Claude. Fr. Thomas remarked that in his efforts to stand up to the violent temptations of life as a university student he should from time to time have sought solitude. He may well have done that too. There was a Carthusian monastery in the vicinity of Nantes, and when Claude in his retreat notes mentions that he had given some serious thought to embracing the Carthusian way of life as one of his options, he may have been influenced to admire their vocation due to his visits to this St. Clement's monastery at Nantes.

Then there was another community in that region known as the Community of St. Clement founded by M. l'Abbé René Leveque, one of those enterprising clerics who initiated several good works of a pastoral nature wherever he went. Latterly he had been principally involved in the preaching of parish missions but when he had been a clerical student in Paris he was among the first to organise a centre for deprived students studying for the priesthood. When he returned to Nantes after his ordination that work was carried on by an other indefatigable cleric, François de Chansiergues. He was so successful as an organiser in this area that he was approached by many throughout France to help set up such or frugal type seminary for poor scholars. Among those who sought Chansiergues's help to start such a seminary in Rennes were the two Canons Ferret, brothers to the banker and counsellor who was so intimately linked with the des Places family. Claude was familiar with that seminary founded in Rennes and with its subsequent development. It is highly improbable that he would have spent so long in Nantes without having had some contact with the man who started it all, as it were – M. l'Abbé René Leveque of the Community of Saint-Clement. It was in fact to join this community in its pastoral work that St. Grignon de Montfort headed for Nantes in autumn 1700 after his ordination in Paris.¹¹ It has been taken for granted that Claude had just left Nantes for Rennes by the time Grignon de Montfort arrived there to take up work with Abbé Leveque, but that is not at all certain. As the baccalauréat was a three years course Claude should normally have remained on till 1701.

Assuming for the moment then that Claude finished his three years' course at Nantes to qualify for his Baccalauréat in Law, his final year would have coincided with Grignon de Montfort's sojourn in the Community of St. Clement. If that were so, there is nothing more certain than that they would have been in contact with much to discuss about the past and perhaps about the future. No extant document, however, confirms such a meeting at this juncture.

Père Le Floch quotes the famous Latin chronicle of Christian life in France then, *Gallia Christiana*, as saying that Poullart des Places attended law schools in Nantes, Caen, Angers and Paris, but while he thinks it unlikely that Claude did any part of his legal studies in either Caen or Angers he assumes, but gives no proof, that Claude did the final stage of his legal studies in Paris. His argument would seem to be that only the best would have been good enough for Mr. des Places senior, and as expense was no object he would in the normal course of events have sent Claude to finish his studies in Paris. In the absence of any concrete evidence to the contrary, it may be accepted that Claude did all his legal studies at the University of Nantes.

The University at Nantes claimed control over all third level education, including that of future priests. This applied even to the Irish College which had set out to cater for the needs of a sizeable Irish student population, some of whom were in Nantes because of the strong trade links over the years between this great port and ports in the south of Ireland. Statistics for 1737 show that 75 ships entered Nantes from Ireland – 38 being for the Irish ‘Nantais’ with cargoes of wool, hides, beef, butter, etc. Most of the students were those who had been forced to come there to study for the priesthood in the absence of facilities in Ireland. One student deserves mention here as he would soon be well known to Claude, namely Dublin born Michael Moore. He did his studies at Nantes and Paris being ordained there 1664. After having served in Paris, Dublin and Rome he was appointed rector of the University of Paris 1701 just as Claude arrived there to be begin his theological studies.

The University at Nantes had a special motive in asserting control over the Irish College. Unruly local students from other institutes were being accommodated there for tuition, thus tending to undermine discipline in the town. Letters patent for the Irish College were sought and granted in 1666-9. Permission to hold classes in the college itself, rather than having the students attend the university, was conceded under strict conditions. One of these was that the 4 Gallican Articles of the 1682 Declaration be taught there. At that time the college was poorly housed in La rue du Chapeau Rouge but in 1690 they were allowed to move in to Maison de la Touche which had up to then been used by the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine from Rennes. As that community had failed to secure the required letters patent they were suppressed and their property forfeited in accordance with the 1666 decree forbidding the foundation of any further religious communities without first acquiring letters patent.¹²

There is no evidence that Claude had any contact with the Irish students but it would be impossible for him to be unaware of their presence as he travelled round town. There was even an area called *Place des Irlandais*. The Jesuit community also would be conscious of its links with Ireland and England. It is not beyond the bounds of probability that Claude, being a Breton, would feel a natural empathy for his fellow Celts in exile.

He had already made the acquaintance of sons of the Wild Geese in Rennes and in Caen apart from his professor of philosophy, Fr. Felix Byrne. But there are two factors about the Irish College which would have interested him as a law student and which were later to exercise his ingenuity in eluding the far-reaching arm of the royal edict of 1666 in the matters of letters patent and resisting the University’s insistence on the Gallican tenets in third level teaching. These we will see later as Claude goes about setting up his house for students in the Latin Quarter in Paris quite close to the Irish and Scottish colleges.

Before we leave Nantes, however, it may be of interest to see the town in relation to the apostolic work Claude was to start and the society which he was to found.

Nantes was famous because of its seaport. It put the town in direct contact not merely with the rest of France in those days of poor overland communications but it put it in contact with the great world across the seas also, more especially, however with the French colonies. Claude must have whiled many an hour away watching and admiring the great sailing ships come and go on their great adventures. It was here that Claude no doubt would have had his first glimpses of the natives of those foreign parts where the priests from his seminary were one day to minister. Nantes was the principal port used by the French East India Company. Incidentally, several Irish shipping families (Sarsfields, Joyces and MacCarthys) are known to have been involved in this company. Among the more murky maritime activities organised from Nantes was the trafficking in black slaves from Africa for enforced service in the French colonies. Again it would appear that Irish shipowners were deeply involved.¹³

Louis XIV's *Code Noir* set out in 1685 to humanise the treatment of these slaves employed in the plantations. Claude would have known of this legislation but he might not have known how ineffective it proved to be. Had he been able to peer into the future, he would have seen his successors declaring their total solidarity with those slaves in French overseas territories, and it would be from Nantes that many of these missionaries would set sail for the colonies. But this is looking too far beyond human horizons and Claude's problem for the moment was his own immediate future. He had not as yet discovered his real vocation, and it would seem had not discussed the matter at all with his family since he first broached it before setting out for Nantes.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

While Claude was occupied with his studies, enjoying the new-found freedom away from home, and making his own contacts at Nantes in the University and in the social and religious life of the town, he may not have faced up to his future. It is certainly obvious from his own admission later that he had not as yet come to terms with the personal decision as to his future. His family may have left him very much to himself hoping that he would eventually step into line with their hopes and plans. Claude was the type who preferred to please people than to cause annoyance, and he makes it very clear that he was not merely respecting his parents for all they had done but that he really loved them. His parents then went ahead with their plans as if there was no question but that Claude, on having finished his law studies, would in spite of some hesitations fall in with their plans. They had made big plans in fact.

According to Besnard, Claude's mother had ordered his robe of office and sent out the invitations for the ceremony of his being installed. That the robe in question would be the finest quality available might be expected as Madame des Places had specialised in the wholesale cloth trade. The question that remains unsolved is which robe was it, that for the *avocat* or barrister, as worn by Claude's father, or that of the more prestigious post of *Conseiller du Parlement*. Besnard, referring to it as une *robe de palais*, seems to believe that it was the *conseiller's* robe. That there would have been a lavish celebration of Claude's being called to the bar was to be expected, but all pointers seem to give the impression that something bigger was being planned. To be appointed *Conseiller du Parlement*, Claude would normally have to be twenty five years of age whereas he was at most twenty two. More important was the lack of the necessary title to noble status. Apart from the family's inability to produce its title deeds, matters had been made immeasurably more difficult because the de Places family had been involved 'in twenty different types of commerce'. This wiped out any title of nobility on the part of the family.

There were certain options open to Mr des Places, one being to buy an office for Claude which would entail noble status. That was what his banker friend Ferret du Tymeur had done: he purchased the posts of *serétaire du roi* (royal secretary) for both his sons thereby allowing them seats in parlement. Des Places was wealthy enough to do the same and though there is no record of his having done so, one is left with the impression that the des Places family had marshalled all their funds and friends in Court to make this the big occasion planned for over the years. It certainly seems to be the interpretation taken not merely by Claude's first biographers, Fr. Thomas and Fr. Besnard, but also earlier on by the writer of the secret report of *L'Assemblée des Amis* (1703).¹⁴ Hence the shock and embarrassment suffered by the family when faced with Claude's abrupt reaction.

Let us first hear Fr. Besnard's account as he dramatised, perhaps excessively, this family scene:

His father wanted him to become a Counsellor in the Breton Parliament and his mother had so little concern over her son's inclinations that she had already gone to the expense of making a magistrate's gown (*une robe de palais*) for him. The moment he tried it on he felt an immediate distaste for the magistracy. He approached a big mirror and while he looked at himself dressed in the gown of Themis, he apparently decided that the main thing was to carefully weigh the scales of justice and not to ascend the tribune to show off his purple, that he should not become the magistrate he saw reflected in the mirror, and that it was not so easy to assume the qualities of a judge as it was to vest in the robe of his office. However that may be, God illuminated him with a penetrating light which made it clear to him that he was not called to this state of life. He took off his gown and openly declared that he would never again put it on.¹⁵

Fr. Thomas, who has no place for drama in his narrative and little time even for concrete details, just mentions the crisis in order to point out the spiritual lessons to be learned, especially by the students of the seminary which Claude had founded, the spiritual family, as it were, God was to give him in place of what he was now renouncing without knowing why. Let us listen to Fr. Thomas himself:

It is easy to realise how he (des Places senior) and his whole family were mortified when all their plans were shattered by the repugnance their son had just shown for the legal profession. This was all the more grievous for them because all the necessary preparations for the event had been made. And all the people on whom his admittance depended had been approached. Though they suffered, his father and mother were too religious to grumble. They did of course complain to their son and even sought for an explanation because they were unable to understand what had caused him to have this repugnance. But perhaps he did not know the reason himself.

God had His own designs which He did not yet reveal. He destined this only son who was so tenderly loved by them to a state that was much higher than the one his parents contemplated. He wanted to attach him entirely to His own service. He desired to make him a model of the most heroic virtues, the father and head of a priestly family which was later to render great service to the Church, and to give him a numerous progeny, one capable of multiplying itself, and one that would last, perhaps, till the end of time. It is thus that God is accustomed to procure for us a great good, even when He opposes those of our schemes that do not appear unreasonable to us. Monsieur and Madame des Places were devout enough to guard against placing themselves in opposition

to God's plans if He had made them known. However, prudence demanded that they put their son's aversion to the test to see if it were not just a passing whim. They still kept hoping he would listen to reason.¹⁶

Naturally it was taken for granted at the time that Claude's incomprehensible behaviour sprang from a repugnance he had somehow conceived towards the practice of law. Fr. Thomas is probably correct in suggesting that at the time Claude did not know his own mind fully then but when some time later he decided to do a very special retreat to search in prayer and with the guidance of a director for what was God's will for him, part of the process was to put on paper a clarification of his own mind and to inform his spiritual director of his honest reactions to the various options open to him. In that revealing document, which has provisionally survived, we have his own personal statement of his reactions to a career in law and it is more helpful to quote it here than when dealing with that decisive retreat. These notes, as we have remarked earlier, are in the form of a dialogue with his own heart. He has been discussing the various secular options – soldier, financier, and barrister. He ruled out the first two as not for him. He then goes on to weigh up the pros and cons of the robe, i.e. the legal profession.

Hence only the robe remains and I would like you to examine a little what you are seeking for in such a career. I believe that you would like the law and that, following your natural bent, you would defend the poor, the widow and the orphans, when right is on their side. You would be zealous even in that charge, you would worthily acquit yourself of it, if in all this your desire to please everybody did not expose you to the danger of disrupting all your good plans and resolutions. You would like to do your duty because you are religious, and yet you would like to listen to those who make all sorts of requests of you, because you like to satisfy everybody. Such a career would be in conformity with your secret and extreme tenderness towards your parents. You would be able to see them frequently and comfort them after their great labours. You claim that your diplomacy would be a great help to you when you approach those in power, and that your kindness would draw everybody's hearts to you, and the opportunities for public speaking would earn for you everyone's esteem and applause. In order to satisfy that ambition, which in any state is going to be the strongest passion you have to contend with you would carefully seek a function which would give you a chance to make frequent speeches and addresses, and since you would not be satisfied with the simple profession of a lawyer who relies mainly on public discourses and printed documents, you would prefer a position which of itself would make you gain the respect of others and give you the opportunity to constantly increase that esteem by your significant speeches.¹⁷

These candid statements of his frame of mind and natural tendencies need no clarification. In them we recognise the personality of the young man that we have been led to surmise from the exterior evidence up till now but at last we are able to listen in to the inner man speaking in so far as any one can be objective in describing his own inner states. Claude knows that his heart is not a sufficiently reliable guide to follow in the choice of a career, that he must state the problems that strike the intellect, as it were. He feels, for example, that he is called to a life of celibacy, and that it would not fit in easily with the life as *avocat or counsellor* even when his interpretations of that life seem more those of a social worker. It might be even more dangerous to his salvation, he realises. Another reason he gives that the legal

profession might not suit his temperament is that he has a scrupulous conscience which would continually question the morality of his legal decisions and eventually become depressed because of his failures, or else end up hardening his heart to such considerations. But he just cannot make up his mind which to follow, his heart or his head, in this matter of options for the life in the *Parlement* of Brittany which has been the goal held out for him since a child, or in choosing what for him may well be the better way to salvation. It is clear from the final paragraph given to the consideration of a legal career that he did not reject that state of life out of mere repugnance, that his "heart", puts up a strong case for opting for the profession of the "robe":

You want me to believe, O my heart, that with age I would become more firm and, as I become more rational, having a good conscience, I would become less easy-going and less subject to corruption; that, more over, all this vanity would disappear and since I am suffering enough because of my natural inconstancy, I would be less subject in that profession to the regret and chagrin that thoughtlessness causes. Finally, you might consider that, as you grow older, you would be able to moderate your ambition and would not follow that eager desire of advancing at any cost, and since you are greatly inclined to give alms, you would be able to make me do good deeds and draw on me enough of the Lord's grace to deliver me from my passions.¹⁸

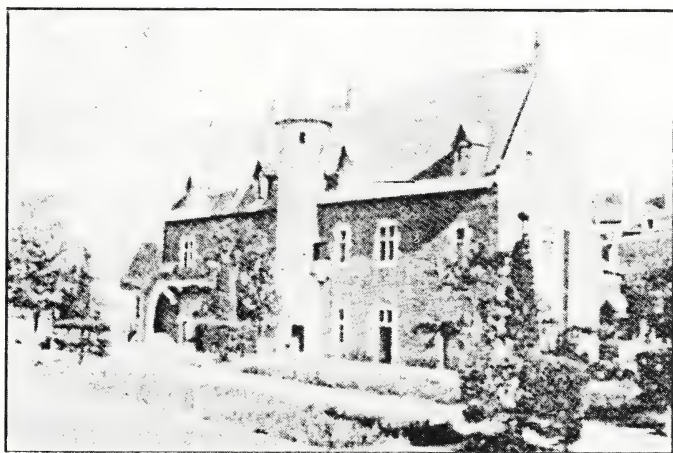
And so, he realises the argument could go on and on, not being able to decide for himself what is best. Instead he will trust in the Lord to guide his director to help him decide. But he makes it quite clear that he is not turning his back on the world because he fears or dislikes it. As he puts it, "My heart, I know by all the thoughts you suggest, that you have no formal dislike for the world, no more than you have a dislike for the religious or the ecclesiastical life".

This then was his state of mind as he was to express it during the retreat that ended with a definite decision. It seems that having put aside the robe and having refused to practise as an *avocat* he may have remained on at Rennes for a time, presumably helping at the family business and following a very regular and religious programme of life. But there is a total lack of concrete facts to go on. An entry in a baptismal register reveals that Claude had acted as sponsor in Rennes around Easter 1701, so it may well be that having terminated his law studies by then he had remained on at Rennes helping out at the family business for the next few months. There was plenty for him to do in the vast family enterprises, and his success in the management of all the practical and legal aspects of his undertakings in Paris later would seem to prove that not merely had he inherited much of his parents' *savoir-faire* in these matters but also he must have had some experience in management. He was a brilliant scholar but was no bookworm. The family business, as we saw, was just across the street from the Hôtel de la Monnaie where his father had to be in attendance regularly though not by any means constantly. By 1701 the new family home had been completed at the corner formed by the rue Saint-Guillaume and rue de la Cordonnerie (rue de la Monnaie today). His sister Jeanne-Françoise then 15 was still attending school, possibly with the Ursuline Sisters beside the Jesuit college. His father's health had begun to give some cause for worry, and that was one of the considerations that Claude had to face during his retreat. He wrote, "My father is old and he will leave behind a lot of business affairs which few besides myself will be able to put in order". He knew his obligations to his parents; but life as a businessman, merchant or financier was not to his liking. On one occasion later he was to mention that deep down he felt a slight grudge

that his parents owed their wealth to commerce rather than to inherited property as nobles like many with whom he had to rub shoulders. When eventually he did renounce all claim to a share in the family wealth in favour of his sister, it did not cost him a thought. By that time he had wholeheartedly embraced “lady poverty” as his bride. But one can well understand his puzzled father remarking that he was not enamoured of the extreme form of virtue being practised by his son! Towards the end of summer 1701 Claude and his family must have come to the conclusion that the time had come for him to make up his mind definitely as to what career he was to choose and in his uncertainty the most obvious course was to do a serious retreat in the Jesuit retreat house where he would have the quiet and the leisure to weigh matters up and seek counsel.



View of Nantes



Irish College for poor students

A Crucial Retreat

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

One of the most remarkable things about the extant notes from Claude's 1701 retreat is the fact that they have been preserved. Claude left Rennes for good soon after this retreat, taking with him to Paris only what he judged of value. He, and his community after him, were to see several changes of abode, ending up with the confiscation of the seminary buildings for the space of thirty years. Yet, somehow, these pages managed to survive all these vicissitudes. This is all the more remarkable in that they are but the jottings of a young man, fresh from his third level studies, who was grappling with the truths of the spiritual life for the first time, and in the process trying to discover his own vocation.

It is obvious then that these notes must have had at least a sentimental value for Claude himself. Above all it is clear that his religious family must have treasured them and saw to it that they survived as a family heirloom. Who it was who made sure that these few pages survived the depredations of the Revolutions is not known, but providence, which had planned so much in Claude's career, has provided us with this welcome opportunity to see what manner of man Claude was at this stage and from his own words trace the motives which guided his choice of vocation. We peruse these notes, then, not in search of any original insights on Christian spirituality in general, nor even, as a source of Spiritan spirituality. Claude, as far as we know, had little leisure to commit his thoughts on such matters to paper even after he had done his theology and matured with the experience of life. Indeed he remarks in these notes that he was often told that it was far more important to keep such things in one's mind than to put them on paper! Once we put these pages, then, in the perspective of a young man trying to clarify his own mind on the things that matter in life, we can approach them mainly for what they can tell us about Claude himself at this stage of his development. We will have of necessity to read between the lines, as it was not Claude's aim to reveal himself to others but rather to himself. And one of the most interesting exercises will be to read these pages in the light of his subsequent development. Much of what might at first sight sound mere rhetoric, rings far more true when viewed against what he later put into practice.

The notes are divided into two clear cut sections even if the titles do not come from Claude's own pen, namely 'Reflections on the Truths of Religion' and 'Choice of a State of Life'. Both sets of notes must be read against the backdrop of the 'Ignatian Exercises' and the lectures by the retreat giver. His opening statement sets the context: 'My wish was to retire from worldly activity so as to spend eight days in solitude...', and later, as he begins the second section of his notes, he writes: 'During this retreat I hope, my God, that you will speak to me in the depths of my heart and in your mercy deliver me from the embarrassing anxieties caused by my indecision...'

One can visualise the situation in the des Places home and among their close friends in the days preceding. Since Claude's dramatic renouncement of the 'robe' and his inability to come to any definite decision about the future, it must have been felt by all that it was time for him to sort himself out, so to speak; and considering his antecedents, the most normal course for him to follow was to join with a group doing the Ignatian special retreat at the retreat house attached to St Thomas'

College. He had in the past followed the shorter retreats that were part of the school year, as well as the more special one on completing his philosophy course. On those occasions it was unlikely that he boarded in at the retreat house, but one of the great advantages of this special intensive 'think-in' was that one cut oneself off from family, from friends and from business worries. That this was not an unusual occurrence at that time we are assured by a contemporary author who wrote as follows about this retreat house founded by Fr. Maunoir and conducted since 1675 by Fr. John Jégou:

I was impressed by the young gentlemen who had separated themselves from their companions from fear of offending God, seeking in this solitude a refuge from the violence of their own temptations and the bad example of others. But I was specially surprised and edified to see many people whose positions and employment engage them in the world, and some of them in high places, come and thus lock themselves away out of the most singleminded and sublime motives. Some come to make reparation by a retreat for the harm that social gatherings do to the glory of God, others to lament the blindness of the worldly-minded, etc. In former times people went to Egypt to visit the solitaries; will nobody come to Brittany to visit these retreat houses? You can see here the true faithful who adore God in spirit and in truth and one would then bless the founders of these type of devotional establishments.¹

Note-taking at a retreat and the restating of one's newly acquired insights comes more readily to some than to others. We think of this facility as more typical of the French temperament. Claude, with his prolonged liberal, philosophical and legal studies, takes easily to this exercise. Indeed, at times, we sense that the rhetorician has taken over, revelling in the literary development of a theme that has particularly struck him. Not that he can be at all accused in these jottings of writing for writing sake. One sees that he is deadly serious in his search for truth. It is just that at times his form of emphasis is to let his pen move freely.

The opening lines are, significantly, a bit tortuous as if he had difficulty in finding the right note, but what does emerge clearly is that at last he is facing up to the fact that for a long time he knew in his heart that the Lord was calling him to a special vocation, and was developing a special relationship with him, but that he was kicking against the goad. He writes: 'Fortunately I am one of those beloved children to whom my Father and Creator so frequently offers easy and admirable terms of reconciling myself to him...'. So, he concludes, the obligation on him to respond is greater. At last he confronts his own deeper self as follows: 'Arise my soul! Now is the time to yield to such loving pursuit. Can you, even for a moment, hesitate to abandon your worldly ways .. Should you not be ashamed to have resisted so long...?'

Claude goes on then to describe in vivid terms how the Lord had been protecting him all along from evil, even in spite of himself. These lines we have already quoted when dealing with his time in Nantes as they seem to be referring especially to the temptations encountered when as a law student he was removed far from the restraints of parental control.

He realises that he has been pursued by the Hound of Heaven and that at last he is at bay. He now speaks direct to the God of love:

You sought me Lord, and I fled from you.... I wanted to be at variance with you, but you would not allow it. Feeling the weight of your arm when you chastised me I should have admitted my fault and recognised the enormity

of my crimes... You always treated me with kindness, as though you needed me. You deem it an honour to subdue a heart as cold as mine...²

Claude is amazed at his discovery of this newfound intimacy with God, above all with the discovery that the God who is all powerful goes to the trouble of wooing the hearts of those he has chosen. And it is in the light of Claude's subsequent response to the Lord that lines like the following, which at first sight might seem to be mere literary outpourings, take on a prophetic ring:

You love me, divine Saviour, and prove it in a striking way. I know your tenderness is infinite, for not even my innumerable and continuous acts of ingratitude can exhaust it. For a long time you have wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with me. For just as long I have been unwilling to listen. You try to convince me that you want to make use of me in the most hallowed religious posts, but I try not to believe you. If your voice sometimes makes an impression on my mind, the world comes along a moment later and effaces all the impressions of grace. For how many years have you not tried to restore whatever my evil passions destroy! I can well believe that you do not wish to fight any longer without success and that you have commanded victory to come down on the side of justice. The siege you have mounted against me during this retreat will be glorious though not so difficult as its predecessors. I did not come here to defend myself but only to let myself be won over.³

Claude now promises the Lord 'to have ears only for you and entertain no other affections but those which will make me love you as I ought'. But he realises that wishing such a radical change will not in itself achieve his objective, that he will need the grace of God to persevere this time:

In order to put myself in the dispositions needed to listen to your wise counsels, I will take up again a plan of life which will come as near to Christian perfection as my conduct until now has come to the imperfection that is found in ambition and worldly vanity. I must, as it were, change my nature, divest myself of the old Adam and clothe myself with Jesus Christ. ... Lord, you want me to be a man, yes, but a man after your own heart. I know what you are asking of me and I want to grant it to you because you will help me. You will give me strength and anoint me with your wisdom and virtues.⁴

Realising that he will have to do battle against many types of temptation, whether these be attributed to the spirit of evil or to his inner weakness, he beseeches the Lord as follows: 'If a weak reed like me has to be exposed to the fury of the winds and strongest tempests then gird me with your mercy and cover my infirmity with the robe of righteousness.'

From the imagery used by Claude to express his thoughts we are able to find echoes of the books and the Latin texts which form the backdrop to his notes. There are copious Latin sayings interspersed throughout the text which may have been added afterwards or were used by the preacher who could take it for granted that all his audience were familiar with Latin. The scriptural texts would certainly have been quoted from the Latin version; so would 'The Imitation of Christ' which is ever present in themes and phrases. At times one catches echoes of St Augustine's *Confessions*, but at all times one must remember that the principal text being followed is the 'Spiritual Exercises' of St Ignatius. Indeed one can almost pinpoint the exact section at each stage. For example, the contrast he paints between himself and the fallen angels – who were so perfect and who had sinned

but once – belongs to the First week, First exercise, Third consideration. This is Claude's restatement of a topic which is less familiar in retreat considerations today. To point out that his theology of angelic and human malice is defective would spoil the point he is making.

Yet, what a difference between such perfect beings and an utterly miserable creature like me! How could these angels, just as much your work as I am but to a degree of excellence far superior, fail to stem your anger and disarm your justice? They only sinned once. Could I possibly count the number of times I have fallen? Their sin was one of weakness; mine were deliberate decisions to offend you. Theirs was only a thought, mine both thoughts and actions. They sinned less than I yet I have been spared more than they. If they had had a single moment to come to their senses, they would have seized the opportunity. How many opportunities the Lord has offered me of which I did not wish to take advantage!⁵

It is worth noting that when Claude tries to grapple with the notion of the enormity of the guilt of deliberate sin against God that he makes use of the class distinctions in society which meant so much to people at the time, not least the des Places family and their closest friends. Claude writes: 'A slap on the face given to a peasant by a nobleman, deserves some atonement, but if it were given to a nobleman, a lord, a king, say by a peasant, what would it deserve or rather what would it not deserve?' As he wrote this one wonders if Claude was mindful of his own uncontrolled reaction when confronted with what he judged to be 'a marked insult' from a mere coachman en route to Nantes; but at the risk of jumping ahead in Claude's story it is worth noting at this stage that his life's work would be dedicated to the service of the poorest, thereby ignoring in practice the social distinctions which he now takes for granted.

Much of the first part of the retreat notes is of necessity rather impersonal, but we do catch occasional glimpses of Claude himself and his particular problems. When he tries to assure the Lord that he wants at whatever cost to prove worthy of his love, he puts his finger on the biggest obstacle, his 'predominant passion' or main weakness, namely his ambition for glory. He states his personal problem as follows:

My saviour, at whatever cost I want to make myself worthy of your love. Henceforth that is the limit of my desire. My heart, until now so full of vanity and ambition, found nothing in the world that was high enough to satisfy it. I am no longer astonished that earthly and perishable things were unable to do so. That heart was reserved for God and has now found something to fill it completely. From now on it will be occupied with you alone. Will there be a single moment when it is not raised up to you, when it does not devote all its thoughts to you as so many considerations keeping me always on my guard?⁶

One is tempted at this stage to smile at the neophyte's assurance and to remark cynically: 'Wait and see!'; but reading these protestations again in the light of his subsequent performance, we realise that at times the performance measured up to the promise. Claude points to the explanation when he follows on: 'Lord, I have just promised never to offend you again. You know my intention and you are the one true God who can discover in the intricate folds of the heart what has been hidden there with utmost secrecy...'. He reminds himself of the 'big cedars' who have fallen in the past in spite of their protestations, and visualising his own possible

fall, if it is not forestalled by God's grace, he makes this interesting reflection: '...I would no longer feel interior peace, joy, or peace of conscience but would love my lack of peace, kiss my chains and, despite their weight, fool myself into thinking them agreeable, so as not to give up my crimes and so as to find more pleasure in my disorder...'

At the instigation of the retreat master, no doubt, Claude goes on to imagine what his death would be like if he had remained estranged from God. This exercise in imagination and dramatic portrayal of the future, takes on an entirely new dimension again when read in the light of the facts about Claude's own death which was to be so entirely different, due of course to his choice of vocation at the close of this retreat. This passage is worth quoting as showing the type of death he was to try his utmost to forestall:

Would I not die as I had lived? Not having thought at all about my salvation during life, I would not think about it at the hour of death. I would be taken by surprise; I would die without foreboding, without being warned by failing health, sickness or any other symptom of mortality. Sin would be in my heart and I would be preparing to commit another. All those I had loved so well, my passions and the devil I have served so well, would not be able to add a quarter of an hour to my life. The prayers people would say for me, the exhortations, the sacraments would not help me at all, but sin would still be alive in me at the moment of death, through God's just punishment'.⁷

From this time on the thought of death was to play a significant role in Claude's spirituality and approach to life – not in any morbid sense but as the fact about life that was to influence deeply his way of living. And perhaps it is worth noting in this context that the most authentic portrait of Claude which has survived is the striking study of him on his deathbed. We find him here fired with the enthusiasm of the beginner who is studying the art of life and has come on the secret already:

I have just been given a reliable means of watching over even my most insignificant acts and of keeping myself ever pleasing in the sight of God. This is the secret which I have been looking for and which I must cling to. I must keep reminding you, O my soul, lest you ever forget it. Remember your last end and you will never sin.⁸

He goes on to develop this new intuition with obvious relish proclaiming that death, viewed as the most meaningful stage of life, will henceforth determine his philosophy of life and his actions:

I must live so as to die and I must live well so as to die well. Eternal happiness depends on my death, just as my death depends on my life. In what condition do I wish to die? In the same condition as the one in which I live. As one lives so shall he die. It is up to me to take whatever steps I think fit. It depends on me whether I die in a state of grace or not, since it depends on me with the help of God whether I live a holy life or not. How happy I am to be able to choose how I die. Since I wish to die the death of the just I must live a life which is absolutely holy and entirely Christian.

I am going to begin doing what I would want to have done at the hour of my death, and at that hour what would I not want to have done? What austerities would I not want to have practised? What virtues would then seem of no avail? What moments would I not discover which had been suitable for thinking about my salvation? How I would blame myself if I had not used the

time at my disposal in the practice of good works. Help me, Lord, to serve you faithfully. Engrave deeply in my heart the sentence I will have to undergo, so that I never act except in view of my death, and as though it were for the last time in my life.⁹

When Claude says, 'What austerities would I not want to have practiced?' one might be tempted to treat that as a throwaway statement which in time will be literally thrown away. Not so for Claude and many of his ilk in France of that era. Austerities in the way of doing severe corporal penance may not be in fashion today; they may even be written off as merely negative and morbid. But that is to be a feature of Claude's development as from now and will have to be taken into account as we try to assess his temperament and spirituality together with his significant positive contribution to the world of his time. Such austerities would be viewed by Claude as part of his all out fight against the two great temptations he has to contend with, namely the wealth accumulated by his parents for his benefit, and the passion for honour and glory which had been his own driving force in his efforts to excel at studies and other aspects of the life of a gentleman during the reign of Louis le Grand. Let us listen to Claude as he sets out to slay these two dragons in his life:

What stupidity it is to fill one's heart with the things of this world and to have one's head bursting with vain-glory. After my death what will remain of all that is earthly, what will the earth retain of what is mine? A six-foot grave, a piece of evil-smelling cloth, a coffin made of four or five pieces of rotten wood. And what will I bequeath to the world? the goods I have accumulated and the corpse which I cared for with such tenderness all my days. These are what I take with me and what I leave behind me when I die.¹⁰

The type of burial Claude visualises once again suggests to us to look briefly into the actual future when he will opt for *La fosse commune*... 'the pauper's unmarked grave', leading to his being eventually swallowed up in the anonymity of the Paris catacombs.

Being in the mood, Claude goes on to cast a cold eye on other aspects of the type of life he had hitherto valued so highly – the airs and graces of an aspiring young gentleman in the jet set of Rennes:

All the habits I have so laboriously acquired, the esteem I have taken such trouble to win, the friendship and trust I shall have built up through numerous services, – goods, riches, honours – will any of these follow me to the grave or help me to win God's favour? Will my dearest friends, even my nearest relatives, remember me for long and, if they do, what good will I derive from such remembrance?

Once I am no longer alive no one will bother about me any more. Everyone thinks about the living because he has to deal with them, but no one thinks about the dead because they can no longer be of service. What blindness to love things of such little value which cling to us only as long as we can help them.¹¹

When Claude, influenced still by 'The Imitation of Christ', remarked rather pessimistically that no one thinks about the dead because they are no longer of service, we are tempted to wonder what he would have thought of his being remembered for so long after his own death! But at the moment what occupies his mind is what he would have to face immediately after his death, namely judgement.

He views this searching judgement as a further compelling motive for keeping to the 'strait and narrow way', and his description of it may well be coloured by his own familiarity with the court tribunals where it was expected that he would play his part as legal expert:

When you leave this life, perhaps at a time when you believe you are as far away from leaving it as ever, you will have to appear before the judgment seat of God's divine majesty. You will stand before your God without being able to hide from his all-seeing eyes. No one will speak up for you, only your own good deeds. Will they be able to plead more eloquently than your misdeeds? Not a single saint will intervene on your behalf. If they were to speak they would be in favour of your condemnation, since you have despised Jesus Christ's blood.... You will be standing before a judge who is more lovable than love itself and more terrifying than vengeance, but his goodness does not counterbalance his anger if you are guilty.¹²

It is when Claude sets out to restate the retreat reflections on the punishments following judgement – the punishments of hell in particular, that he allows his pen to flow freely both in the description of the sufferings as they were then envisaged and in his attempt to grapple with the concept of eternity. These reflections are not the stock in trade of retreats today, nor is Claude's style of writing here to our taste, vitiated perhaps by parodies of such sermons on the eternity of hell as found in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. However it would be less than frank to pass over completely this section of his notes. Here is a sample:

Count as many hundreds of millions of years as there are drops of water in the ocean, leaves on the trees, grains of sand on the river banks, blades of grass on the earth and atoms in the air. Add the fact that this is not just a year of eternity, not a month, not a day, not even an hour; it is less than a moment, for there is no time in eternity.

What a horrific idea! To howl for all eternity! To weep for all eternity! To burn without cease for all eternity, and that in every part of the body at the same time! Never to see the end of one's sufferings, to have as the supreme refinement of this torture the ever-present notion of eternity – something that will never end but will last for ever. It is impossible to talk of days, months, years or limits of time when it will come to an end; it is an infinite, measureless space, in final analysis an eternity, during which the individual will be continually driven mad with anger, without any alleviation, without being able to die, always gnashing his teeth, always tearing himself to pieces in fury and despair, always swearing and blaspheming the name of God, and after ten thousand billions of centuries not relieved in any way, nor any more disposed to be relieved than when it first began.¹³

In his attempt to imagine the concept of an eternity of time, Claude for a moment feels himself that the picture he has conjured up does not do justice to his faith. He is forced to comment: 'In reality my mind gets lost in such an abyss. I do not know whether I should believe it or not because it is beyond comprehension...'. He realises that God's judgement is not a matter for the imagination but rather an object of faith. The reality of a deserved punishment cannot be doubted; the manner of its description differs from person to person as well as from age to age. When Claude attempts to give a rational justification of eternal punishment for a deliberate offence against God, he returns again to the parallel taken from the social distinctions within society in his day:

An offence against a king would be treason, whereas against one of his subjects it would only be a slight offence. Since among men it is the rank both of the person offended and of the one who offends which make the insult more or less serious, so the majesty of God who is offended and the lowliness of man who offends should make us realise the enormity of sin. And so, now, as I reflect on the difference between God and the sinner I am no longer astonished that the punishment for such an unworthy deed should be so terrible.¹⁴

So much for his treatment of those who have deliberately and irrevocably excluded themselves from God's friendship. But even those who aspire to living in the presence and close company of God for all eternity must undergo intense purification from the dross of human weakness either in this life or the next. As he reflects on this he addresses God directly:

You are too pure and too perfect not to hate imperfection. You will not allow any souls to enter the heavenly Jerusalem who are not wholly purified either in this life or in the next.¹⁵

Claude has no hesitation in giving a notional assent to this axiom of the Spiritual life. Later we shall see him trying to grapple with the experience of such purification during his own Dark Night.

Having wrestled with the concepts of death, judgement, and divine justice, it comes as a relief to Claude that the preacher put before them a more positive secret of successful preparation for entering into the eternal presence of the Lord, namely the cultivation of the habit of consciously living in his presence during life. One can feel the new note of elation in Claude's style as he writes:

The secret of success in so praiseworthy a desire never to displease you, as it was explained to us today, seems excellent to me, and I long with all my heart never to forget it. Therefore I must remember that I am always in your presence no matter where in the world I may be, that you see me and that I can never offend you without you being a witness to my disloyalty. Once I have acquired the habit of never forgetting that you are everywhere, in my thoughts, in my words, in my heart as well as in my room, in the street or in any other place, I will always be respectful and submissive. I will never think, speak or act without first consulting you.¹⁶

This practice of living in the presence of God was, in fact, to be a key factor in Claude's rule of life as from then. We shall have occasion to refer to this matter later; but it is worth noting at this stage that Claude's successor, Fr. Libermann, was to be a great exponent of this practical union with God (*l'union pratique*).¹⁷

In this context of the continuity of Spiritan spirituality there is one key aspect of that spirituality which at first sight is conspicuous by its absence here, at least in the matter of the language used. When Claude writes: 'I will never speak or act without first consulting you', one would expect him to refer to the all pervading influence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who aspire to keep in close union with God, but one searches in vain for any such reference to the Holy Spirit. We need not be surprised, at this, however, when we reflect that he was following the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius which were geared to a very specific method of consulting God; there was no encouragement given at this stage to follow the inspirations of the Spirit. Such a practice might even be suspect as open to personal delusion. The guiding role of the retreat giver was crucial to this exercise.

On the other hand the paramount importance of the Blessed Eucharist as a

means of union with Christ is stressed. Claude states his resolution of never missing attendance at daily mass. But as yet there is no hint of any deep desire to be the minister of the Eucharist himself. Again this omission might seem strange, but we have to remember that at this stage there has been no formal consideration given to his choice of vocation; that would be the main preoccupation of the final stage of the retreat. But even at this juncture, where he is concentrating on the great truths of the spiritual life as applied to his salvation, he is moved to care for the salvation of others. This is a natural consequence of serious reflection on the Christian faith for any one, and we would expect such a spontaneous consideration from one who had been a member of the Sodality of Our Lady which never allowed its members to be so preoccupied with their own salvation that they forgot their duty to be apostles of Christ. So we are not surprised that once Claude realises what great things God is doing for himself, he wants to spread the Good News of salvation. His statement of that duty and his compliance with it sound somewhat immature as yet, but the will and the enthusiasm are unmistakable:

I will make you known to hearts that no longer know you. Being myself familiar with the disorder of souls who have fallen into a bad habit, I will persuade, convince and force them to change their lives, and so you will be praised for ever by mouths which would otherwise have cursed you forever.

I will make known to these unhappy people what your divine goodness has made me understand today. I will use the powerful means of your grace to convert them.¹⁸

As Claude comes to the end of the first stage of this retreat devoted to consideration of the great truths and to the formulation of resolutions on how to conduct his life in the light of these truths, he realises that he has a big fight on hand and that his worst enemy is within himself. His predominant passion has been uncovered during these days of prayer and study. There remains the task of confronting that passion at all levels. But most important, he has discovered that God is on his side, totally so:

O my God, keep me faithful to these good resolutions and grant me, please, the grace of final perseverance. I will have to fight against enemies who will be out to destroy my virtue by tempting me on a thousand different occasions. At the same time they will seek to ruin me altogether. Lord, defend me against these tempters. Since the most formidable of these is ambition, my ruling passion, humble me, crush my pride and silence my vain-glory. May I find mortifications at every turn! May people rebuke me and despise me! I accept all this provided you continue to love me and I always remain dear to you. I will find it hard to suffer and to stifle the vanity that fills my heart, but what should a person not endure for you, the God who has shed his precious blood for me?

Nothing will be difficult for me if you are willing to help me and I abandon myself entirely to you. I must distrust myself and hope in your mercy.¹⁹

Some strong words about 'crushing his pride and silencing his vainglory'; these are an earnest of the severe mortifications he was to undertake in the near future. He is certain now that God is calling him to a special intimacy with himself.

He is sure also that his present way of life is not what God wants from him and therefore it is unsafe for him. He does not know for certain where God wants him to go from here but he is not going to follow his own lights in the matter of the serious choice to be made. He will try to reveal his soul completely to his

director and, having done that to the best of his ability, he will accept his guidance as coming from the Lord who is calling him.

In my present state I have everything to fear. My present state does not meet with your approval. If I wish to be saved I must choose the state you have foreseen for me. This must be the first object of my reflections. I will be only too happy if I do not make the wrong choice. I am going to use the holiest of means to discover your sacred will. I am going to make known to my director my likes and dislikes concerning each different kind of life, so that I can examine more attentively the one which seems to suit me. I will leave out nothing which I consider necessary in consulting your providence. Divine Master, may your grace enlighten me at every step. May I merit this by being attached to whatever pleases you, irrevocably and for all time.²⁰

A TIME FOR DECISION

The second section of Claude's retreat notes has again no special title in the extant manuscript but because of the subject matter it was aptly entitled Choice of a State of Life. This section consists of a mere nineteen pages, divided into 23 paragraphs, but it is a classical case of the quality supplying for quantity. This is a precious heirloom for the members of Claude's spiritual family, but it is also a document of universal interest as it depicts vividly the process by which a gifted young man seeks to discover his special vocation following the guidelines of the Ignatian exercises.

Knowing that discovering one's real vocation is not a mere exercise in clinical self analysis but a prayerful attempt to decipher what God has written in the depths of one's being, Claude starts with a prayer for guidance:

O my God, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem for those who really trust in you, I have recourse to your divine providence. I abandon myself entirely to you. I give up my own inclinations, appetites and will in order blindly to follow yours. Be good enough to show me what you want me to do so that I may follow here below the way of life you have traced out for me. May I serve you during my pilgrimage in a way which is agreeable to you and may you shower on me all the graces I always need to offer the glory due to your divine majesty!²¹

He realises by now that one of his biggest problems is his irresoluteness; that left to himself he has proved to be a Hamlet who can analyse and philosophise to perfection but cannot arrive at a decision in his own case. He balks at the irrevocable choice. Convinced by the reflections in the earlier part of the retreat that his salvation is what matters above all else in the choice he has to make, he is determined to bring this criterion to bear on the various states he is going to consider as realistic options. How to read the message imprinted by God on his individual characteristics, his temperament, his gifts, and limitations, is a task beyond him. So he speaks directly to the Lord about his problem:

During this retreat I hope, my God, that you will speak to me in the depth of my heart and in your mercy deliver me from the embarrassing anxieties caused by my want of decision. I realise full well that you do not approve of my present way of life but have chosen something better for me. I must take a firm, rational decision to consider seriously my salvation. Happily I am convinced of the need of salvation. While here, I have been meditating on this truth as though it were the most important and most necessary in the Christian religion.²²

Claude feels that, in the recollection of the retreat house, he has arrived at that state of mind when he can honestly declare before God and his deepest self that he has now no preconceived ideas of what the Lord should accept from him; that it is for him to listen to what the Lord is saying deep down in his being. This he realises will call for absolute honesty in weighing up the various natural indications, a process, it would appear, he had tried before and had failed. He describes this exercise as follows:

Since I have no preconceived ideas and prejudices I must once again consider my likes and dislikes for each kind of life. In this holy place nothing will distract me. Here I am more in the presence of God than anywhere else. I do not have to disguise my feelings, since God understands them better than I do. He knows I would be trying to deceive myself if I did not speak sincerely. I want to weigh things according to 'the scales used in the sanctuary' so that, once I have made my choice, there will be no need to reproach myself any longer. I will know that God wants me to adopt this particular state of life.²³

Then follows a concentrated pen picture where he tries to portray himself as seen by himself in the presence of God. It is not written for the benefit of other people but it affords us the most authentic portrait of Claude that exists; it rings true in the light of what we have already seen and provides the key to much of what is to follow. As such it is imperative to quote it in toto:

I shall begin by examining my temperament and calling to mind my emotions, good and bad, for fear of forgetting the first and allowing myself to be deceived by the second. I enjoy excellent health, though I appear very delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing makes me ill. As strong and vigorous as anyone else, hardened to fatigue and work, I am nevertheless inclined to be lazy and easy-going, applying myself only when spurred on by ambition. By nature I am mild and docile, extremely obliging, almost incapable of saying No to anyone, and in this alone am I constant. By temperament I am slightly sanguine and very melancholic. What is more, though rather indifferent to wealth I am passionately fond of glory and of anything that can raise a person above his fellows by his own achievements. The success of others fills me with jealousy and despair, though I never allow this ugly vice to reveal itself nor do I do anything to satisfy it. I am discreet where secrets are concerned, rather diplomatic in all my conduct, enterprising in my designs but secretive in their execution. I seek independence yet I am the slave of splendour. I am afraid of death and this makes me a coward, though I cannot tolerate insult. Too fond of flattering others, I am in private ruthless with myself when I have committed a faux pas in public. I am sober with regard to the pleasures of food and drink and rather reserved with regard to those of the flesh. I sincerely admire truly good people and I love virtue but rarely practise it myself because of human respect and lack of perseverance – sometimes as devout as a hermit, pushing austerity beyond the limits becoming a person of the world; at other times soft, cowardly and lax in my Christian practice; always frightened when I forget God and fall into sin. I am scrupulous to a fault, and that almost as much in times of laxity as during times of fervour. I recognise well enough what is good and what is evil. God's graces are always there so as to help me to discover my blindness. I like to give alms and am naturally sympathetic to the ills of others. I hate slanderers. I am respectful in church without being a

hypocrite. This is what I am and in this description I see the portrait of my real self.²⁴

In the various portraits of Claude painted by Jean Jouvenet or whoever, we have attempts to depict aspects of the real man as imagined by an outsider; here we have the subject himself doing the revealing from inside. He realises that the portrait contains strong and weak points in his character and he admits that he has much yet to do before he reaches the perfect image God wants to create in him. He remarks that if he were already perfect it would not matter what state of life he chose, but taking into account the reality of where he is at the moment, he must choose that state which will allow him to use the talents God has given him and where his defects can be gradually contained so as not to impede God's purpose. So he concludes this introductory part of his retreat notes with the words:

Any state of life would suit me and I would have no more aversion for one than for another. Without these imperfections I would be perfect. Their number can be reduced but it is very difficult to make sure that not even one still remains. Therefore I must not make my decision without taking everything into consideration lest, in forgetting my enemies, I fall more easily into their hands.²⁵

In the main section of his notes he goes on to review the various ways of life which he lists as practical options for him, grouping them under three main headings – the religious or monastic life, the clerical state or pastoral priesthood, and life in the world. This last category he will reduce to four possible professions.

First the religious life, that is life in a religious order. He begins by making the point that a man could be a saint or a sinner in each of these walks of life, that it is not the habit that makes the monk. He would fully agree with the author of *The Devout Life* who, writing a century earlier, had made it clear that God gives the grace to live a devout life in every honest profession, taking for granted that it is the one meant by God for that individual. For those whom God is calling to a special way, that choice is highly important. For those choosing to enter religious life Claude thinks that their particular image of God is already a guideline. In his own case Claude is convinced that if he is to opt for life in a religious order it must be an order which makes the greatest demands on human nature. He then proceeds in true Cartesian style to apply the “methodical doubt”, having his inner self question the assumptions that normally would guide his decisions:

First of all I want to put before you religious life. You must tell me the reasons why you do not dislike this state of life. I know you must be inclined towards some particular view of God. I will know more once I learn what order you would like to enter and when I know better the reasons which sometimes draw you towards this way of life. You reply that you will never take the monastic habit except as a Carthusian. I praise your choice of this form of religious life because I believe your only motive for embracing this kind of solitude would be your desire to concentrate on your salvation.²⁶

One might wonder why Claude gave serious thought to embracing such an austere way of life rather than opting for one of the various religious orders he had known so well in Rennes and with whose temporal affairs his father was so closely linked in his professional capacity. One is particularly surprised that he does not consider the Jesuits with whom he had such close relations and for whom he had a high regard. One might be tempted to answer that familiarity breeds contempt; the more

familiar he was with their way of life perhaps the less he was attracted. That could happen even when he was not particularly critical of what he had seen. But Claude feels that none of these orders posed sufficient challenge to his inner self, or did not measure up to what he felt the Lord was asking from him personally. That the Carthusian way of life would make severe demands he was certain. His personal knowledge of their way of life could only have been acquired during his years at Nantes where there was a long-established community. What contact he had with that community we do not know. What is clear is that he must have been impressed by their life of sacrifice and prayer and was convinced that preoccupation with one's salvation could be the only motive for choosing such an unglamorous way of life. That he really felt called at times to that way of life is confirmed by his remark that at times he was 'as devout as a hermit'.

Then comes one of those dramatic surprises which make these retreat notes so fresh and at times fascinating. Claude digs down deep into his own psyche as he confronts himself with the following challenges drawn from selfknowledge:

Would not laziness, perhaps, play some part in this desire? Might there not be some annoyance at not being sufficiently esteemed by the world, at not belonging to a sufficiently illustrious family or at not possessing the necessary wealth to reach the position you covet? Are you not afraid that some day it will become apparent that you do not have the great mind you were thought to have? Are there not a thousand other subjects of vanity which might encourage you to love solitude? I do not know what to believe about this.²⁷

Claude has applied the scalpel with such surgical severity that he does not know what to think about the doubts he has raised! He goes on to raise some positive objections, based again on selfknowledge. He says: "Let's suppose, though that is unlikely, that there is no flawed motive in my preference for the monastic life, are there not some practical personal considerations which would make this choice of life in a Carthusian monastery less than suitable for me". The answers given for this poser put certain aspects of Claude's life into clearer perspective:

Let us suppose for a moment, although this is a situation which cannot really exist, that it is not unsatisfied ambition that makes you consider such a state. Would you then have any reason at all for not liking the solitary life and for rejecting this vocation? You are a melancholic dreamer who in your moments of solitude become fretful although you like to be alone. At such times you stop your mind from thinking of something good because your want of constancy makes you conjure up ever new desires. In their turn these new desires create a thousand fantasies which torment you and deprive you of peace of mind. At present you are so fickle and so attached to your freedom that I doubt you are made always to contemplate the same four walls and never to unloosen the chains that bind you.²⁸

So he feels that he was not cut out to be a hermit all the time. Apart from these considerations of a very personal nature he then presses the inconveniences that would arise from his commitments to his family. First there was his sister, Françoise, still only sixteen years old.

How would you reconcile your solitude with the affection you have for my sister? You love her tenderly and you cannot bear to be separated from her for any length of time. She is not yet settled in life and she is so dear to you that you want to take an interest in her welfare.²⁹

Françoise stood in line to inherit the family fortune if Claude opted for a monastic vocation. We don't know anything about her attitude to her brother's problems about his vocation. We shall meet her later in connection with her marriage to a member of a family of noble status when she was richly endowed by her parents. But that was as yet hidden from Claude and his parents. He is conscious that he owes so much to both of them that he would have to have very compelling reasons for shutting himself away at this stage into an enclosed community far from his parents even if as good Catholics he knew they would not try to oppose his vocation. On this consideration he writes:

My father is an old man who will leave behind a good deal of business concerns which few people other than myself would be able to put in order. You understand the duties I have towards the father and mother who brought me into the world. They will not oppose my vocation once they know it is a holy one. Would it not, however, be a consolation for them to see me living in the world and to be able to count on me?³⁰

Though Claude is here exploring all the possible options that are relevant to his own case, even the less likely ones, we can be sure that at some time and in certain moods he must have seriously thought of making this ultimate sacrifice of all that he had prized as an act of love of the Lord. As such he owed it to his conscience to explore this possibility to the limits. Now he can assure his soul that he can lay this idea to rest:

My soul, you will tell me that you are undecided as to the different states of life, but I answer for you and say, you are not as undecided as you think. Religious life does not attract you.³¹

Having considered the least likely vocation first, he next takes up what he feels is the way of life most suited to his circumstances, though as yet by no means certain, otherwise this election would be merely an academic exercise and as such would not achieve the open-minded approach called for. And since, on the face of it, Claude's mental state seems weighted in favour of the clerical state, all the objections would have to be raised and dealt with to make sure he was not making his choice from faulty motives and that it did really suit his particular temperament and character. His inner self starts then by complimenting him on the choice of this vocation which is already approved in principle:

I know you are much drawn to clerical life. Of the three it is apparently the one you are most likely to embrace. I do not blame you for this bent, provided I am convinced you have the right intentions, namely God's glory and the longing to secure your own salvation. It is true that there are signs of this intention, but I notice many other motives. I am convinced you would like me to make this choice so as to convert souls to God, to remain more regular in the practice of virtue, to be in a better position to do good, and to give alms to the poor more generously. Such a scheme is worthy of praise and contains all I would ask of you so as to approve your choice.³²

At this stage we are waiting for the inevitable 'But'. It comes with a vengeance. Claude may be gentle with others; he is ruthless with himself, especially when searching out his motives for doing what is right. He continues:

Yet tell me honestly is that the only reason you have for wanting to see me serve in the Church? Will not vanity itself, your dominant passion, become

the real reason for your vocation? You flatter yourself with the thought that my preaching will be greeted with applause and thus glory and honour will be yours. This is where you are most vulnerable for, if I agree to become a priest on condition that I never mount a pulpit, you will never give your consent. What then will be my decision?³³

One is amazed at Claude's self knowledge and the honesty of his appraisal as if he were speaking about someone other than himself whom he knows intimately. But the very extent of his knowledge and the objectivity of his judgement are factors contributing to his irresolution. He knows too much to be able to decide without having doubts. He is not reassured by the seemingly sensible reply to his objection about his vanity being a determining factor in his choice of the clerical state – namely that since this trait is part and parcel of his make up, it will affect every choice, and that if he were to have to wait for a way of life entirely immune to this factor, he would remain for ever in the indecision he is trying to combat. He is more impressed by the means proposed for combating this basic vanity, namely frequenting the sacraments, the study of theology, meditation on the life of Christ, especially his humility. All this would help diminish this dangerous passion for glory and replace it with a Christian outlook on life. 'Fine', comments the indefatigable inner objector, 'but remember you have to fight along an extended front of so many other faults at the same time'. He expands on this theme:

To do you justice, my soul, I believe you really think like this and would try to stifle your vanity. But what is your answer to the obstacles put in your way by your excessive desire to please others, your jealousy and dissimulation, the boldness with which you undertake a lot of things which you should not even dream of doing, your flattery, human respect and inconstancy in doing good, your softness, your inclination to lead an easy life, your melancholy, and all the other defects of my mind and temperament? You will find it hard to destroy so many things which are opposed to that holy state and which, in a priest, must be seen as so many abominations. I know you hope that grace will be a great help since you will try to co-operate with it. This is the best of your reasons. The others you suggest are not so good.³⁴

At this stage, especially after reading this list of defects, one might be led to believe that Claude was indeed a rather unsatisfactory candidate for the clerical state, but one must realise that he is measuring himself against the high standards which he has set for himself, standards which are normal among those on target for the heights of heroic sanctity; and we shall have occasion to see Claude endeavouring to scale these heights. At the moment he has to be content with the promises that come from his deeper self:

You promise me you will renounce your desire always to please others and you will ask the Lord to make you steadfast; that for this reason you will oblige me to enter a seminary where piety reigns, there to drink in a new life, creating in you a gentle habit of virtue; that you will change your easygoing ways and will no longer indulge your passion for pleasing others, except in order to do good. This of course would be a wonderful thing in one who has a meek and kind heart and earnestly embraces a life of virtue.³⁵

Of special interest, in view of his subsequent preoccupation with seminary training, is his reference to his intention 'to enter a seminary where piety reigns' as the assured means for the aspirant to the clerical state being fashioned to 'a gentle habit of

virtue'. Such a training is taken for granted as being normal now, but in spite of the call by the Council of Trent over 140 years previously, only a relatively brief sojourn in a seminary just preceding ordination was obligatory in most dioceses in France as yet. If Claude were to study for the priesthood in the diocese of Rennes he would have to do the main part of his theological studies as a 'day student' while residing at home. Only for the final year would he be obliged to enter the senior seminary being conducted on behalf of the diocesan authorities by the Eudists. And, significantly, when he states that his inner self would oblige him "to enter a seminary where piety reigned" he is citing words used by St. John Eudes in his first ever publication (1636, Caen). Claude's own inner self argues that these very faults, which would seem to bar his entrance to the clerical state, would in fact call for such a decision as they would render his salvation much more precarious in the world; the safeguards built into the clerical way of life would in time help diminish these faults and sustain him if he were to fall.

Finally Claude's inner self concedes that there are some positive indications in his perceived natural preferences which would greatly assist him in adapting to the clerical style of life:

You explain that the indifference you experience towards the other sex, the distaste you have for family life, my tender conscience, the jealousy which I shall certainly have to moderate, but which can serve as a good influence on my work, the desire I have always had, since my tender years, to serve the Church, the predilection I have for the poor, the respect I have for holy things, my love of virtue and, over and above all this, a thousand other good reasons prompt me to approve that state and to consent to the choice of a kind of life that seems to fit me very well.³⁶

One is not surprised by some of the motives mentioned by Claude as marking him out for the clerical state: his natural inclination towards a life of celibacy, his distaste for family life, his lifelong desire to serve the Church, but one is perhaps unprepared for the special mention of the predilection he has for the poor. One could reflect on the influences which had shaped Claude in that direction over the years – the example he had been given by some of the family friends, his membership of the Sodality of Our Lady etc, all of which gradually led him to cherish the poor in a society dominated very much by the rich. This was not exactly what he had been groomed for by his parents, especially his father. But leaving aside the past for the moment, one senses that the priesthood being visualised by Claude already was such as would enable him more surely to come to the assistance of the marginalised in society. He could do such work as a priest in the diocese of Rennes, as had been done by l'Abbé Bellier and the Canons Ferret, but it would be precisely this aspect of the pastoral ministry which would eventually influence Claude to opt for a certain independence in his choice of mission field.

At this stage of the investigations, the normal vocations director would have little doubt that Claude was deeply attached to the priesthood. He concurs with such a judgement as follows:

I have to agree, my soul, that you are much more inclined to the ecclesiastical than to the religious state. I notice quite easily that this inclination is much stronger, in spite of your indecision which makes you waver between so many possibilities.³⁷

But Claude is so deeply conscious of his own chronic indecision, his inability to say a definite 'Yes' or 'No' in this matter, that he is going to pursue all the likely

options to the bitter end. His inner self wants to make morally certain that he is not going to have second thoughts when confronted with the sacrifice of so much that he prizes in life in the world.

If I did not know you I would come to agree with your wishes in no time. However would you yourself agree if I were to say to you just as quickly, 'Come on now, I want to make you happy, let us say good-bye to the world once and for all, let us side with the Church and abandon completely all other institutions'? I realise that to some degree you are attached to the world, that you would ask for a little time to think it over. It is unfortunate that at one moment you want everything, at another nothing at all. You come up with a thousand reasons why you should enter the ecclesiastical state, yet, if I was ready to enter immediately, you would still want time to think about it. You still love the world a little and you do not quite know which of the two you should love the more. Both suit you and both please you. I need only talk to you about them one after the other for you to notice that you are attached to each. I still want to know what line you take when thinking about the world. After that I will try to persuade you to make a definite choice.³⁸

So Claude wants a decisive confrontation between his real self and those aspects of life in the world that still appeal to him. He applies the acid test: 'Why do you really want to remain in the world? Is it because you are convinced that it is there you will best attain the Glory of God and work out your own salvation'? He knows he has the faith and has built up deep religious convictions, but he is also conscious of a strong element of the unbaptised pagan in his make up. To be more explicit then he confronts himself with the only practicable options for him if he were to choose to remain in the world: the army, finance, law, and life at the court in the sense of service to the king.

In the reign of Louis XIV with wars in continuous progress on various fronts, soldiering was a common career and an attractive one for the ambitious young gentlemen who might not relish taking part in the actual fighting themselves. We have seen that Claude was quite familiar with the use of firearms and fancied himself as a swordsman. However, he does not pursue this option very seriously, not, however, because of physical cowardice. His brief statement is as follows:

Soldiering has no attraction for you because of your delicate conscience, as you put it, and because of the difficulty of saving your soul in such a profession. It is even more difficult as a soldier than in any other career since death is almost always unforeseen and yet, for all that, no one thinks the more about it.³⁹

And as we have seen, the lesson that Claude has engraved on his mind from the early part of the retreat is that it is death which gives meaning to life.

As to a career in finance Claude dismisses the suggestion in the following few words: 'The latter (finance) is not to your taste and I agree that it does not suit you'. At first sight one might have expected him to have given this career further consideration. His family-friends, the Ferrets, so closely linked to himself as sponsors at his baptism, were specially allied with his father. No doubt they were involved in his many major property and commercial deals. Indeed as both Claude's parents were involved in the commercial life of Rennes in a big way there must have been an expertise in this area fostered in the family. Yet in spite of all this, or should we say, because of it, Claude has turned his back firmly on all that concerned the making of money as a livelihood. He was one of those for whom money mattered only to achieve some service or other. This seemingly

negative trait, which Claude at this stage takes little account of, was in the designs of providence to have a vital role to play in his major undertaking and the cachet he was to give it.

A much more plausible choice of career for Claude in his own eyes and in the opinion of others would be court life – life in the service of the king in the diplomatic as opposed to the military realm. That he seemed to be cut out for such a career may have been the reason why his visit to Versailles had been arranged earlier on. Claude feels he has to deal with this prospect at some length in order to be sure that there are no lurking desires for this way of life which meant so much in the world of Louis XIV, and perhaps it meant much more to those living in the provinces than those nearer the capital. This is what Claude writes on this option:

You would prefer court life. A position in the king's service would appeal to you because it would give you satisfaction. Your life would always appear to be calm and peaceful. You would live now in one place, now in another. You would find scope for your political acumen, your gift of flattery and dissimulation, your human respect, your mildness and self-satisfaction, in a word for all the little gifts you imagine I have. In truth nothing in the world would suit you better, so long as I do not take religion into consideration and am willing to gratify your passions.⁴⁰

But what about the temptations normally associated with the life of a courtier, especially with his pliant type of temperament? Claude rejects the answer that he would be able to behave in a gentlemanly fashion in this walk of life as in any other: 'There are too many occasions of sin for you and you have not the steel in you to resist all along the way'. Interestingly, he adds the reminder that his parents would never consent to his adopting this form of career and that he owes far too much to them to go clean contrary to their wishes in such a serious matter. We can gather from this that the question must have come up in family discussions and that a clearly voiced objection had been registered. This may refer to events three years previously when Claude had just finished his secondary course.

The only credible option left for consideration now is law, the profession for which he had just qualified and, above all, the profession in one form or other for which his parents had intended him all along. As Claude remarks: 'Such a course of action will fit in perfectly with your deep but secret affection for your parents. You will be able to see them frequently and console them after their life of toil'. One might wonder why Claude seriously discusses the possibility of his opting for law as a career now considering the fact that he is reported as having earlier definitively turned down his parents' plans in this regard. On that occasion he might well have felt that he was being forced into a decision that he had not made himself and that his gesture of refusal was not the result of a considered decision. Now he wants to examine in the calm of the retreat house, away from family pressures, what is his deepest reaction to the career for which he had been formed all along and which he felt he knew so well having lived in the shadow of the legal profession and in the precincts of the Palace of Justice. That there were certain aspects of the profession which appealed to him is clear. What he has now to answer in the only court that matters, the court of conscience, is whether his motive in embracing this career would be to further the salvation of his soul:

Examine what you have in view in such a career. I believe you love justice and would incline towards the defense of the unfortunate, the widow and the orphan, provided right is on their side. You will apply yourself to your

task and acquit yourself worthily unless the pleasure you take in it upsets your good resolutions. Because you are religious-minded you will do your duty, yet at the same time since you like to oblige everyone you will want to listen to all kinds of requests. Such a course of action will fit in perfectly with your deep but secret affection for your parents. You will be able to see them frequently and console them after their life of toil. You claim that your diplomacy will serve you well when dealing with people in power, that your gentleness will attract all hearts and that the opportunities of speaking in public will earn you everyone's approbation and esteem.⁴¹

But there is the rub! He may find that this profession will encourage his passion for glory to the extent that it will hinder his chances of salvation. Further, he must take into account that his deep-seated inclination to a life of celibacy will not fit in well with the normal style of life in this profession and as such may again be a hindrance to his salvation in the long run. And what about his tendency towards scrupulosity? He is bound to make mistakes in the exercise of his duties; his scrupulous conscience will then aggravate his tendency towards melancholy and cause him to be depressed, or, on the other hand, he may try to dull his conscience with all that that could entail. Of course, his soul could argue that on the contrary, with the passage of time, he could overcome his defects, become more steadfast and upright, and through the charitable exercise of his profession merit God's grace.

And so the argument could go on. Even the objection from Claude's distaste for family life need not be conclusive. As he counter argues: 'I know that people get married every day and rightly so. I also know that anyone with a heart as upright, as kind, as good and as sensitive to gratitude as yours, takes no great risk in setting up a household'. In undisguised frustration he continues:

Oh my soul, I know from all the thoughts you inspire in me that you have no real dislike for the world any more than for the religious and ecclesiastical state. You agree because you believe I will not take you at your word, but if I were to make a definite choice you would not agree because you would regret putting aside the other two possibilities.⁴²

One cannot but feel sympathy with this generous and sensitive young man, so in love with life in the world for the sake of the good he could do there, but feeling that God may be calling him to a special vocation which could be realised only by embracing the clerical state. His misfortune is to be so irresolute that he cannot come down firmly on the side of one option to the total exclusion of the others. But he wants to be morally certain of what God wants of him and that can come only from outside himself – from some one whom he can take as representing God's voice in the circumstances. He has already prayed for an open ear to listen to what God is saying within himself. Now he asks God to speak to him through the spiritual director to whom he proposes to lay bare his soul with total honesty. He puts his trust now in God to speak his word through his representative:

Not to make too fine a distinction between us, must we not admit that it is indeed a misfortune for me to be so irresolute! I must turn to you, my God, if I am to make a decision in accord with your will. I am here to consult your divine wisdom. Destroy within me all those earthly attachments which pursue me wherever I go. Grant that, in whatever state of life I choose, I may entertain only those opinions which please you. Since, then, in my present state of mind it is impossible for me to make a decision and yet I feel you want

something more from me than this indecision, I will lay bare my soul to your representative without any reservations.

Through Your holy grace grant that like St Paul I may find an Ananias to show me the path I must follow. I will follow his advice as though it were a divine command. O my God, do not let me make a mistake for I put all my hope in you.⁴³

A TIME FOR ACTION

These retreat notes are not a diary; so there are many questions left unanswered. We are not told who was the director to whom Claude revealed his soul; was it the retreat preacher or his regular confessor? Nor are we given any information about that critical interview – whether it was conducted entirely orally or did the retreat notes play any part in it? Above all we are not told a word about the final outcome of the interview; we just have to draw our conclusions from the events which followed.

The director must have reassured Claude that from all indications it was clear that God was calling him to the clerical state, in other words to the secular or pastoral priesthood. Since Claude had shown no desire for joining any of the religious orders in Rennes, we presume that, in spite of his very pronounced commitment to the interior life, the director did not try to influence his decision in that direction. He would have seen that he was not the type who would fit easily into life in a religious community; being so individualistic in thought and temperament he would be inhibited by the constraints of a rule, at least a rule not shaped by himself. He would certainly not have fitted in with the Jesuit way of life, much as he had trusted his spiritual guidance to members of that society and approved of their way of life as seen from the sideline.

There should have been no further problem then about the road to follow. The normal procedure for Claude would have been to opt for the priesthood in the diocese of Rennes. He could then start his theological studies at one of the senior theological courses been given in the town, by the Dominicans in their long established major community close by the des Places home, or at the Jesuit college of St Thomas where he had done his secondary studies and his philosophy. Both these colleges catered for students who boarded in the various hostels for third level students or who were fortunate enough to be able to remain in their own homes. Only for the final year before ordination, on having been accepted by the bishop for the diocese, would it be obligatory to enter the diocesan seminary being conducted by the Eudist fathers. This procedure would suit the requirements of most. It was the course followed by Claude's friend from boyhood, Michael Vincent Le Barbier, about whom we shall hear more later. That this arrangement did not at all appeal to Claude is not surprising.

By now Claude had come to the conclusion that the Lord was calling him to a complete break with his life-style to date. This logically called for a complete change also from his home and its preoccupations. The way of life of the family and their daily interests had ceased to harmonise with his altered outlook, and much as he was attached to his parents and his sister personally, it was felt by himself and most likely by his director, that he would have to make the complete break now. From his own point of view such a change was called for to afford him the opportunity to develop his spiritual life through the exercises of piety which he felt called to adopt. The atmosphere of the Hôtel des Monnaies (the Mint) close by with its continual preoccupation with money matters, would not be helpful; neither would all the preoccupation with commercial transactions in their own extensive

stores now that he had no further interest in being partner in the family business. He would be something of an embarrassment to the family if he stayed on in the home. It was in their best interests to be left to work out a new policy by which Françoise, young though she was, would be seen to be the heir-apparent with all the rights and duties entailed.

If Claude needed a precedent for this break with family and home surroundings, he could have pointed to the example of Grignion de Montfort. Grignion's departure for Paris may have been the result of an accident in the beginning rather than a thought out strategy, but he was known to have given the scriptural advice to others who had consulted him about their vocation: 'Go out from your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.' (Gen.12.1). Others, including John B. Blain, had gone to pursue their studies for the priesthood in Paris, availing of the hostels being set up there for the less well off aspirants for the priesthood. They attended lectures at some college controlled by the University. For those who could afford it, and who were sponsored already by their local bishop, there was the prospect of being accepted at France's premier seminary, Saint-Sulpice, founded by M. Olier. Saint-Sulpice would answer Claude's expressed wish of entering 'a seminary where piety reigns' and where he would be formed in the gentle habit of virtue. Instead he chose to avail of the offer to be allowed to board at the Jesuit college of Louis le Grand in Paris while attending the theology course in company with the Jesuit aspirants. Other students were allowed to attend the lectures there while boarding in the neighbourhood. That this arrangement would have certain attractions for Claude is obvious because of his long and intimate associations with the society in Rennes, Caen and Nantes. What he was unaware of as yet was how this choice of venue was to influence his vocation and open the way for him to find the role planned for him all along by Providence.

As Claude prepares to quit Rennes for Paris we try to imagine the situation at the des Places home. One can take it that the outcome of the retreat came as no great surprise there. It was most likely greeted with relief as it ended 'the embarrassing anxieties caused by his indecision', and once they had come to terms with the dashing of hopes and plans for a different family prospect, their deep faith would have made them happy with Claude's vocation. What they might not have been prepared for was his decision to leave home for Paris. His father, in particular, who had previously deflected Claude from going to Paris in order to attend the Sorbonne, may well at this stage have had his misgivings on seeing him now cutting himself off from attending the Sorbonne by his opting to study instead with the Jesuits. A university degree was the vital passport to preferment for lucrative ecclesiastical benefices. Claude may not have been consciously choosing that limitation of his future prospects at the moment; but later he was to make this a key issue in his plans for those whom he was preparing for the special vocation he had chosen for them. The seeds of that vocation had already been sown at Rennes by several people, but particularly by Fr. Julien Bellier. So as Claude prepares for Paris we take a brief look again at this remarkable member of the parochial clergy who must have served as his model.

Fr. Bellier, like Claude, had been born and reared in Rennes. He had done all his studies at the Jesuit college and was ordained in 1686 when Claude was seven years old. Though attached to the cathedral parish he took an active part in various pastoral projects in Rennes and throughout Brittany. He helped in conducting missions in country parishes that had been badly neglected over the years. This work was being undertaken by a team of zealous priests known as The Congregation of Priests dedicated to the Holy Spirit. Their efforts produced a spiritual renaissance wherever they went. In Rennes, itself, as we have seen

already, Fr. Bellier was the inspiration of many projects in social and religious work undertaken in conjunction with the St Yves Hospital run by the Augustinian Sisters.

Fr. Bellier made a notable contribution to the religious life of Rennes by his successful involving of young men in the care of the poor as part of their practice of the faith. When asked in 1719 by Fr. Grandet, the first biographer of Grignion de Montfort, to write a note on his recollections of the Saint, Bellier wrote as follows:

Being in Rennes for the study of the humanities from third class through to physics (i.e. from 1688-93) Louis Grignion was one of the many students I gathered each week for a prayer meeting. I was ordained priest at the time and I used send them in twos and threes to serve the poor at the hospital for Incurables, to read to them during meals and to teach them a little catechism. Louis was very fond of this work.⁴⁴

This was the period, incidentally, when Claude is reported as having conducted nearby his little 'secret' society in honour of Our Lady with the collaboration of his own companions.

Fr. Bellier was soon to be involved in another form of pastoral care that was initiated by the brothers Claude and John Ferret, both canons of the Cathedral and belonging to the same family of Ferrets who were so closely linked with the des Places as bankers, businessmen, sponsors at baptisms, and conseillers du Parlement. These two priests saw the plight of the many poor students who had come into Rennes to study for the priesthood, attending lectures at the Jesuit and Dominican colleges, but otherwise shifting as best they could for meals and board. They sought advice and help from Francis Chansiergues in Paris who had acquired a nation-wide fame for his success in launching institutions for poor clerical students. He sent along one M. l'Abbé St. Aubin to help conduct such a seminary in Rennes with the two canons playing an active part in the venture which is variously named a *petit seminaire*, seminary for poor scholars, etc. It had a rather makeshift existence moving from one location to another. Finally in 1697 M. l'Abbé St. Aubin was recalled to his post in Paris. The bishop of Rennes then turned to Fr. Bellier to take charge as he had been helping to lodge some of the students in his own house beside the des Places home. This had happened as Claude was finishing his studies at the Jesuit college. After a year it was realised that the more practical solution would be to ask the Eudist Fathers, who were in charge of the senior diocesan seminary since 1673, to take on the responsibility for this *petit seminaire* also. None but the certified poor were accepted there. The Eudist senior seminary was close by, quite near to the des Places new home from 1698 onwards. One of the Ferret family is on record as having secured for the Eudists possession of an extra house at this period. Fr. Bellier still maintained part of the poor student contingent in his own house – up to twenty of them, until 1711.⁴⁵

All this was in progress right at Claude's doorstep over the years and was being done by close friends of the family and by their neighbour Fr. Bellier. That Claude was fully au courant with this project goes without saying, especially in the later years. As to his practical involvement in the work there is no definite proof. We saw in his retreat notes that he is deeply committed to aiding the poor; and the fact that he got involved in the pastoral care of the little Savoyards in Paris within months of his leaving Rennes, and in the welfare of the poor students, shows how his mind must have been working in those final months at Rennes.

Had Claude attended the spiritual meetings held each week by Fr. Bellier at his house he would have heard him mention a work just published by Fr. Doranlo, one of the band of priests who, like Fr. Bellier, had been preaching parish missions in Brittany for many years. This booklet in the form of an open letter to the bishops of France dealt with the problem of the lack of proper seminaries for the very poor who wanted to be priests, and proposed a plan as to how to meet their need. The thoughts expressed in this booklet by Fr. Doranlo, a former barrister, were but the fruit of the experiences of the band of mission priests, and it was their ideas which were soon to influence Claude and point out to him the work Providence was calling him to do.⁴⁶

As Claude prepared for that long journey by coach from Rennes to Paris, he must have pondered on what things to pack into his traveller's box. There was the inevitable tussle between taking only what was absolutely necessary or to include things that had strong sentimental associations. In the final count the most valuable assets he was taking with him were the lightest, namely those qualities of mind and heart he had acquired in a caring home, through his studying in a well balanced educational establishment, and through having come into close contact with those in the local community who cared and shared.

*alors mon ame il est temps de le rendre
à tant de poursuites aimables, peux tu balancer
un moment à abandonner tous les sentimens
mondains, pour le reprocher avec plus d'attention et
de recueillement ton ingratitude, et la dureté de
ton coeur à la voix de ton Dieu ? ne dois tu pas
avoir soule d'avoir combattu si longtemps, d'avoir
détruit, méprisé, foulé aux pieds le sang adorable
de ton jésus.*

Extract from Claude's retreat notes 1701



Fr. Jean Jégou, director of Jesuit retreat house at Rennes

Paris

Collège Louis Le Grand

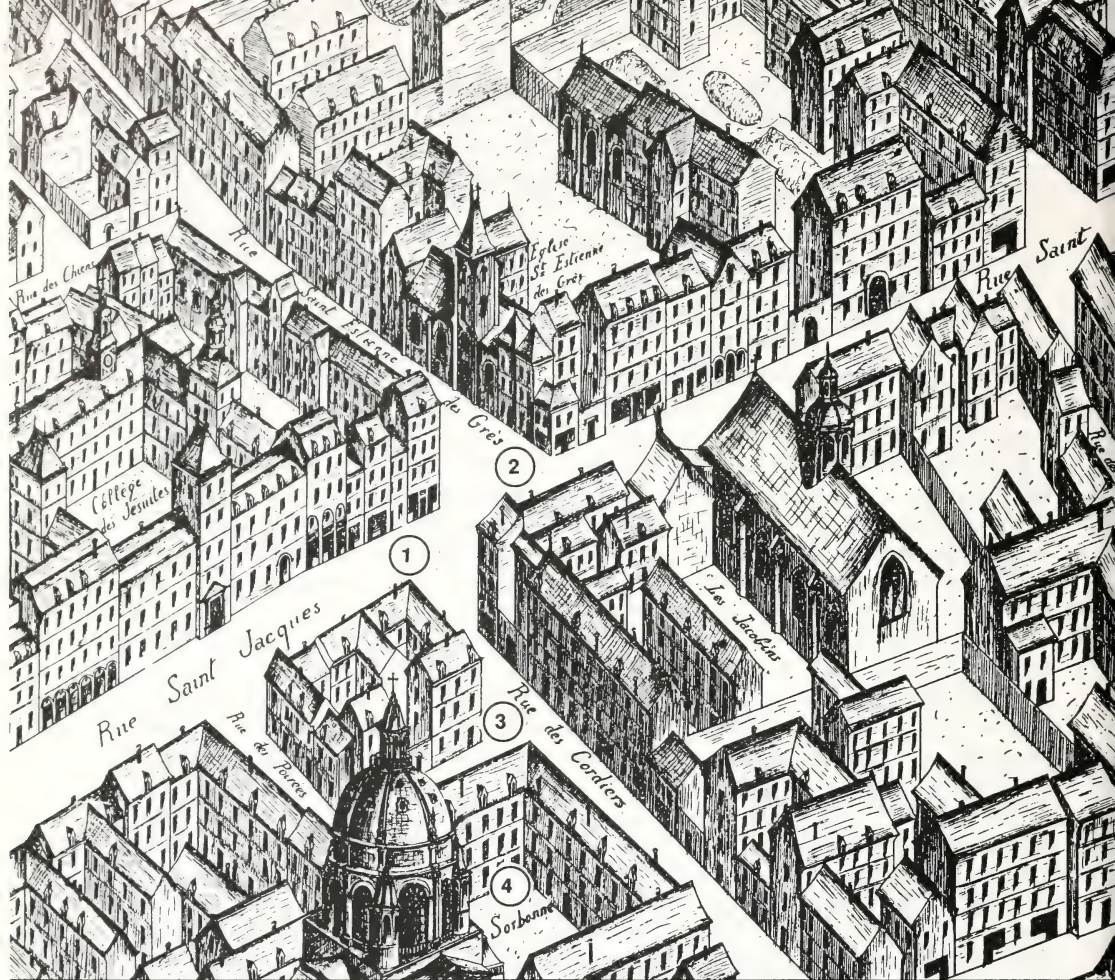
“The foundation of the Jesuits could be said to be the biggest event in the world of education in the 16th Century and it can be claimed that the creation of Collège Louis Le Grand was the crowning event in the history of its colleges”. So wrote Gustave Dupont Ferrier in his 2 volume history of Louis Le Grand; but he went on to add that its success was its ruin.¹

Claude’s decision to apply for permission to do his studies at Collège Louis le Grand was certainly providential in that it was a determining factor in shaping his vocation. It was a privilege to be accepted in this renowned seminary ‘where piety reigns’. It assured him of a deep, religious formation; but it also excluded him from qualifying for a university degree and in consequence precluded him from promotion to a senior post in the church’s structure.

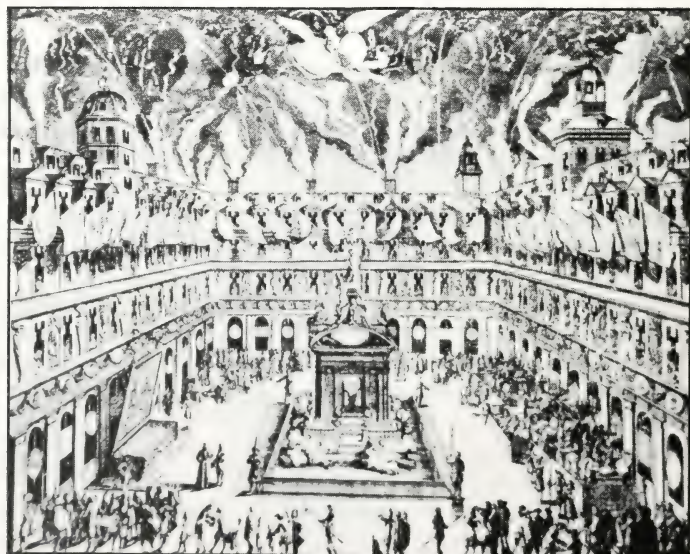
Like St Thomas’ College in Rennes, Louis le Grand College embraced both second and third levels, catering all told for some 3000 students. Founded in 1560, it was originally known as Collège de Clermont as these grounds in the centre of Paris had been presented by the bishop of Clermont, Guillaume Dupont. He was a great admirer of the Jesuits, having seen their beneficial influence at the Council of Trent. Not everyone in Paris shared the bishop’s admiration for these newcomers in the sphere of education, least of all their neighbours right across rue Saint Jacques, namely, the Sorbonne. The close proximity of a third level college with its large secondary school as a feeder posed a threat to the Sorbonne’s monopoly once this new college was functioning at full force in the departments of Philosophy and Theology. In fact Collège de Clermont got off to a very successful start. Its very success, however, proved its undoing. It aroused the jealousy of its powerful neighbour and the Sorbonne had influence in high places in church and state. An attempt on the life of the king, Henry IV, by a deranged past student of Louis le Grand (Jean Chatel) was used as a pretext for banishing the Jesuits from Paris and other towns.

The King himself, it would appear, realised very soon that the Jesuits were in no way to blame for this incident, and having had proof of the quality of the education provided by them elsewhere he authorised the reopening of their college in Paris after a suitable interval in 1603. The college was rebuilt to suit their purposes and reopened in 1614, and despite the continued opposition from the Sorbonne and Parlement, it continued to prosper. The Pope honoured the college by presenting it with the body of the young martyr, St Maxime; Louis XIV took a paternal interest in and gave support to their lavish musical presentations. At this time the king still held court in the nearby Louvre. On the occasion of the birth of the king’s son, the Duke of Bourgogne, the college was renamed Collège Louis le Grand in 1682.² The plaque commemorating this event is still prominently displayed in the inner courtyard of the college, which, incidentally, still functions as a lycée, though no longer under Jesuit management. In fact it ceased to be run by the Jesuits when that illustrious religious congregation was suppressed by church and state in 1762.

The college at its peak period was truly one of the most prestigious educational establishments in France, renowned for the standard of its teaching. It drew its clientele from the very fashionable class, with sons of *grande*es in the boarding



- 1 Collège Louis le Grand
- 2 Saint-Etienne des Grés
- 3 Gros Chapelet Hostel
- 4 The Sorbonne church



Fireworks display at Collège Louis le Grand 1682 to mark the birth of the Dauphin and its own change of name

department cared for by their own valets, daystudents being left off and collected by the family coach which caused one of Paris' best known traffic jams at certain hours. It boasted of magnificent extra-curricular activities which were part of the training in the graces expected of young nobles. Its halls were adorned with paintings by leading artists and its library contained some 22,000 volumes and was fast increasing; by 1717 the number reached 47,000 volumes.³ Some 100 to 150 members of the Jesuit order were engaged in the teaching, management and upkeep of the college and its hostels – a devoted staff which earned encomiums from many writers including François Marie Arouet, alias Voltaire, who was a very junior boarder there (1704-11) while Claude was pursuing his studies for the priesthood.

From 1561 Collège de Clermont was recognised as a *collège de plein exercice* – so its students were not obliged to attend the University, but they forfeited their right to a university degree

The Jesuits had concentrated the cream of their theological teachers at Louis le Grand. The standard of the teaching and the large numbers of students in attendance influenced Pope Pius IV to authorise the college to confer degrees provided the Paris parlement gave its approval. Parlement stipulated that the approval of the University of Paris must first be secured. The University was in no mood to breach its own monopoly in this matter. Further, one of its spokesmen is quoted as saying: "As the University places the Council above the Pope it can not countenance an institution that places the Pope above the Council."⁴ This was but one aspect of the Gallicanism contained in the Four Articles of 1682 which the University insisted on before authorising any concession to third level colleges within the realm even if they were only serving the interests of foreign students.

The current Rector of the University (1701-02) was the distinguished Irishman, Dr. Michael Moore who had done his studies for the priesthood at Nantes, and had spent some years teaching in colleges connected with the University in Paris. Recalled to Dublin by the Catholic Lord Lieutenant, Richard Talbot, he was appointed Provost of Trinity College in 1689 in spite of opposition from the Jesuits. Moore's public attacks on the Jesuits displeased King James II, so he was forced to abdicate as Provost. He then returned to the Continent and having served in Rome and in Paris he was appointed Rector of the University of Paris in 1701. There is no reason to suppose that he had relented on his antagonism to the Jesuits, and to their theological faculty in particular which was strongly opposed by the University.⁵

Numbers attending the theological faculty at Louis le Grand had fallen off by the time Claude arrived there in 1701. Not that there was any fall off in the standards of the college itself. It was just that the Sorbonne was winning the battle for the allegiance of the uncommitted. The lack of a university degree was felt by many to be too severe a handicap to carry as one sought a benefice or post of note in the church. This was a determining consideration even for those coming to Paris from the provinces to study for the priesthood like M. Blain from Rennes, future canon at Rouen and author of a life of Grignon de Montfort.

Apart from the Gallican tenets that were a keynote of the theological faculty at the Sorbonne, there was a strong current of sympathy for Jansenism which was opposed by the Jesuits. This was highlighted by the support given by 40 doctors of divinity, graduates of the University, to the Jansenists' stance in the celebrated controversy about the Case of Conscience which erupted in 1701. Reverberations of this nationwide bitter controversy would have reached Rennes just as Claude was deciding about what seminary to choose for his studies for the priesthood. Louis le Grand would have been known as the staunch supporter of the Roman

Catholic orthodoxy clearly stated in the Council of Trent and of papal primacy as against the attitude of the Sorbonne. As it was felt that the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles, provost of the Sorbonne, was somewhat remiss in counteracting the Jansenists, he would not be sympathetic to the Jesuits in their plans for Louis le Grand.⁶ Claude was soon to be made very aware of these tensions as he found his own infant society caught in the crossfire.

As Claude had already done his philosophy course at Rennes he went straight into the theology department. By that time the number of students had been reduced to a hundred, mostly candidates for the Jesuit order, but there were also a few boarders availing of bursaries or free places, paid for by Louis XIV and other benefactors. There were also some day students as there had been at St Thomas' in Rennes. Most of this latter category in Paris would be from the poorer classes and they received their tuition free of charge. They boarded out as best they could, supporting themselves by undertaking whatever menial jobs they could find, as they aspired to being adopted by some bishop for ordination and for service in his diocese. We shall mention this group in more detail later.

Claude was a boarder residing within the College and was allocated a private room. He paid for his keep from the annual allowance granted him by his father. Though not a seminary in the full sense there would be strict supervision over his rule of life. For attendance at lectures and the repetition classes he would adhere closely to the regulation for the Jesuit students, many of whom may have been known to him from his years at Rennes, Caen and Nantes. He would soon be known and accepted as a distinguished alumnus of one of their leading colleges. Having come with the highest recommendations he was accepted into the inner circle of the Jesuit student body as we shall have occasion to see at some length. For the first year he was in fact just a 'pious layman' following his own rule of life and dressed as a young man of means much as he had been when doing his law studies at Nantes. That was soon to change, but let us turn to his early biographers to see what they have to relate about this first year in Paris. First Fr. Besnard:

After Claude's arrival in Paris, he entered the College of Clermont and began with a retreat. He carefully meditated on the new daily rule he was going to follow and faithfully adhered to it later through the practice of prayer and the frequent reception of the sacraments.⁷

Fr. Thomas, who normally scorns the chronological approach to his subject, has this note:

For a long time he had been considering the idea of giving himself entirely to Almighty God. Nevertheless he had preserved in his exterior and in his behaviour the carefully polished manners of the world. But in 1701 he appeared to have changed quite a bit from the way people had previously seen him. He kept only the straight-forwardness, mildness and gaiety which virtue must possess if it is not to appear sullen...⁸

In the absence of more detailed information we can well imagine that this first year in Paris was for Claude a period of finding his bearings, inside and outside the college, and the serious concentration on studies and the scholastic method of revision. Above all he must have appreciated the quasi-monastic seclusion of his surroundings far removed from the family preoccupations at Rennes and enabling him to take full advantage of the readily available reading matter in the well stocked library.

STUDIES

Though there were no university degrees to be worked for at Louis le Grand, the main preoccupation of students and staff alike was the intensive study of theology. There was an ambience of serious study at various levels in the senior house of studies. Apart from those directly occupied in class work there were other members of the society who were involved in literary and intellectual projects which helped foster a high standard of academic activity and application. In particular, there was a team of specially picked men who were gathered together in this, the principal house in Paris, to act as a kind of think-tank for the Jesuit order, who were able and ready to give considered judgement on current theological controversies and other matters of weighty public interest. A stream of printed works emanated from this group. They were mainly responsible for the production of the quality review entitled *Mémoires de Trévoux*. Fr. Michael Le Tellier, future confessor to Louis XIV, was noted for his trenchant contributions on controversial topics.

There was another group known as the *Scriptores* – mostly retired professors who worked quietly at research in the various ecclesiastical sciences with a view to compiling some work for unhurried publication. These men were best known among the students for their work in helping to guide them in their reading in the extensive library. Their expertise in many languages was constantly being availed of.

Those actually engaged in teaching were usually the best available in the society, being culled from other houses where they had proved their value, in order to keep up the highest standards in opposition to the various colleges connected with the University but most especially their neighbours in the Sorbonne college. The two professors of dogmatic theology had previously taught at La Flèche in Brittany. The main text book used by them in keeping with the Council of Trent was the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas, but as interpreted by the great Jesuit theologian Suarez. The topic most hotly discussed at this period was how to reconcile the efficaciousness of God's grace with the freedom of the human will. Certain theories in this realm of theology had been recently condemned by the Holy See and in the extant correspondence of the members of the staff at Louis le Grand it is clear that they wanted to adhere strictly to the teaching of Rome in this matter.⁹

A very intense controversy raged at the time about the position taken up by the Gallicans and Jansenists in relation to the power of the papacy to assert that condemned propositions were actually to be found in the teachings of any particular author. This matter arose in connection with a celebrated case of conscience where forty divines connected with the University had signed a document signifying their belief that the Pope had no special prerogative to pronounce on such matters. When Cardinal de Noailles was persuaded by Bossuet to condemn these divines it was pointed out that he had himself given approval to a book containing the condemned proposition, namely *Réflexions morales* by Pasquier Quesnel. One of those who had gone into print in an attack on Quesnel, and by implication on the Cardinal, was Fr. Le Tellier. This helped heighten the tension between the Cardinal and the Jesuits and later Claude was to feel the repercussions of this on his work.

We find very few references to his studies in Claude's extant notes. His rule for the seminarians will throw more light on this aspect of life at Louis le Grand. When he refers to his moral theology classes he uses the word *Cases*, this being the liveliest exercise in that section of theology where they discussed moral problems from every walk of life in the light of the principles studied in their main lectures.

Their professor had composed a four volume work on moral theology but the official manual used was that composed by Fr. Thyrese Gonzalez, superior general of the order. The Jesuits had come under severe criticism for their alleged laxist approach to the solution of moral problems. Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* is the best known such attack on the Jesuits in this matter. One author at Louis le Grand had been delated to Rome in 1703 for alleged laxist opinions approved of in his book.¹⁰ Later, 1713, the Cardinal was to forbid the Jesuits to hear confessions in his diocese. Understandably there was a movement among some Jesuits to react against this unwelcomed reputation. We shall have occasion to see that Claude may well have come under the influence of this movement in the practices of mortification he undertook.

Finally, sacred scripture was given its due place in the theological faculty at Louis le Grand and they were obviously not content to study the Bible only in the Latin Vulgate. We are told that the professor of Hebrew had to know several other languages in order to be able to assist the students. One professor of scripture at this period, Fr. Martine, had written his own excellent commentaries which his superiors wanted him to publish, but as he felt he had never said the last word on scripture he did not give his consent for publication. We shall have occasion to see Claude abstracting from his studies of sacred scripture what was the most practical method for his students in their studies.

Many of the staff of Louis le Grand had spent some time in Rennes in various capacities. Their names need not detain us here even though they were men of importance in their day. One Jesuit student who did his theology with Claude is worth mentioning, Charles Porée. Porée had completed a brilliant course at Caen just as Claude arrived there in 1694. He was then appointed to Rennes as junior master or prefect from 1694 to 1701. On completing his theological studies at Louis le Grand in 1704 he was appointed professor in the secondary department where he was idolised by his students as a teacher of literature. Among those to sing his praises in later life was Francis Arouet, better known as Voltaire.¹¹

Of several of Claude's professors it was said that apart from being specially gifted for higher studies they proved excellent guides in the spiritual life for the students. No doubt Claude soon found a spiritual director to help guide him in the ways of prayer he was now entering as a continuation of the 'conversion' begun during his Ignatian-type retreat at Rennes. It is not clear who his director was but it may well have been Fr. Maillard a noted authority on mystical life and regarded as highly advanced in the mystical state himself. Fr. Maillard wrote the life story of a remarkable lady to whom he had acted as director; she was renowned for her work among the sick and the poor. It is significant that while still in manuscript form Claude had it transcribed because of its inspirational content.¹²

Already towards the end of his first year in Paris, as Fr. Thomas informs us, people began to notice a profound change taking place in Claude's manner of dress and behaviour, all pointing to an inner change and a new outlook on life. Several external events helped to accelerate the change: these were the readings of a biography of Fr. Michel Le Nobletz, the receiving of the tonsure by which he was formally coopted as a cleric – donning the soutane or clerical garb, and his admission to the Aa, a secret religious congregation among the Jesuit students of theology.

Let us hear what his biographers have to tell us about this critical stage of his career. First Fr. Thomas:

To the many students of the college who had known him well, he is seen immediately relinquishing the airs of the world in order to put on the habit

and simplicity of the most reformed ecclesiastics. He was not at all concerned about what others might say and instead of avoiding the company of those who might disapprove of his change of conduct, he sought to be with them and to suffer from them. He often deliberately assumed ways of acting, which though never unbecoming from the point of view of modesty or propriety, were calculated to make others despise him.¹³

THE VENERABLE LE NOBLETZ

We are indebted to Fr. Besnard for a very informative detail that goes someway to explain this rather sudden and mildly shocking change of behaviour on the part of Claude:

By reading the life of Father Le Nobletz, a missionary priest who died in the odour of sanctity in Brittany, he was greatly aided in despising the world and surmounting human respect. His fervour always corresponded with his resolutions. His mortifications were so severe that his confessor had often to intervene to moderate his pious excesses...¹⁴

Leaving aside for the moment any reflection on Claude's adopting a life of severe mortification that amazed those who knew him at close quarters, we examine briefly the career and character of this apostolic priest who had such an influence on Claude at this stage.

Fr. Michael Le Nobletz could well be hailed as the apostle of Brittany. Already widely revered as a saint he had spent his life re-evangelizing areas long neglected by the clergy. His work had been the inspiration of the missions being preached by Fr. Bellier of Rennes together with many Jesuit priests whose names would be well known to Claude, but he had been dead some fifty years by the time Claude opened his life story as written by Fr. Anthony Verjus S.J. That book, published in Paris in 1666, thirteen years before Claude was born, had taken on a new lease of life in 1701 with the official introduction of Fr. Le Nobletz' cause for Beatification.¹⁵ Fr. Verjus had returned to Paris in connection with this event and he was residing in one of the Jesuit communities there. This explains why Claude was prompted to pick this book from among the 40,000 plus volumes at his disposal in the college library. With the gift of hindsight we are safe in concluding that providence had guided his hand on this as on several other occasions. Claude must have been pleasantly or perhaps disturbingly surprised to find how much he had already in common with the subject of the biography.

Born in the Breton-speaking part of Brittany Michael had since his earliest years been very devoted to Our Lady. His favourite haunt as a child was the local church dedicated to St Claude. Educated by the Jesuits at Bordeaux, he was the student chosen at the end of his course to defend a thesis in public for the Grand Acte. He opted for law but led a most austere life. He abstained from wine and meat but used his pocket money to give parties for the other students whom he encouraged to be faithful to their religious practice and to a life of prayer. Being haughty and quick tempered he was on one occasion about to stab his opponent with his sword when he found his arm restrained, he believed by Our Lady. This incident affected him deeply and he implored the Lord to send him humiliations in order to extirpate his pride. When he opted for the priesthood he advised his fellow students to be more interested in studying theology well than in the pursuit of a degree and to dispose themselves for the acquisition of wisdom and the science of virtue by the practice of a good life, to choose a spiritual director – preferably a good Jesuit, to avoid the company of nobles and instead to associate with the poor. In order

to be a competent pastor he taught catechism to the young and encouraged the other students of theology to do likewise. He found great support in all this in membership of the Sodality of Our Lady and as secretary he favoured a certain secrecy in the choice of an elite to act as a leaven among the general members.

When his father saw that Michael was serious in his vocation to the priesthood he bought him a richly ornate soutane which he very soon after gave to a poor man begging for alms. Twice he turned down a wealthy benefice secured for him by his father who eventually disowned him. Though Michael concerned himself about the proper preparation of the many poor students seeking to be ordained, he postponed his own ordination for years out of motives of humility. Instead he concentrated on catechising the poor and children and in spending long hours in prayer. Eventually when ordained he opted for a wandering commission preaching missions and catechising. At first he was not accepted by the local clergy though he was highly valued by the public who flocked to his missions. The first priest to appreciate his sanctity and his potential for the pastoral renewal of the faithful was Fr. Bernard, S.J., a native of Rennes and the son of an *avocat de Parlement de Bretagne*. Fr. Bernard eventually prevailed on other priests to join with Fr. Michael in his missions, travelling all over Brittany.¹⁶

So many details in the life of Fr. Le Nobletz corresponded so closely with Claude's own life up till then that he must have felt that the Lord was speaking to him through this book. Much of what Claude was to do from now on seems modelled on the example of Le Nobletz. So when Claude confided to someone that his life had been greatly influenced by the reading of the life of Fr. Le Nobletz, he must have been conscious of the truth expressed by St Augustine in his Confessions: "The example that one feels most drawn to imitate is that of the people who are like us." Had Claude the gift of seeing into the future he would have lauded the action of a member of the society he was soon to form, namely Fr. Leo Lejeune, CSSp: in 1897 he reactivated the cause of Fr. Le Nobletz leading to the declaration in 1913 of the heroicity of his virtues and his being honoured with the title Venerable.¹⁷

The 15th of August 1702 was a red letter day in the life of Claude. Till then he was but a 'pious layman', albeit fully committed already to aspiring to the ministerial priesthood. The ceremony by which he was publicly accepted by the church into the clerical state is known as tonsure. The external signs of this official dedication were the ceremonial cutting off of his hair by the bishop and his donning of the clerical garb or soutane. First he had to receive his 'dimissorial letters' from the bishop of his native diocese of Rennes. These letters were dated 5 August 1702. The name of the prelate in Paris who performed the ceremony on 15th August has not been ascertained.¹⁸

ASSEMBLÉE DES AMIS, (AA)

As well as this public ceremony admitting Claude into the clerical state, another much more private ceremony involving Claude took place at Louis le Grand. That ceremony was so private that knowledge of it has come to light only in recent times. It was quite common in French seminaries, and in Jesuit senior houses of studies in particular, for a secret religious society (*congrégation secrète*) to exist to which admission was granted to a select number who were known to be of exceptional character, already committed to a more intense spiritual life and inspired by an apostolic spirit. Such secret societies known as 'bandes' persisted in French seminaries in the nineteenth century as is known from the life of Fr. Libermann who was the guiding force in such a society at Saint Sulpice.¹⁹ By that

time seminary directors were not totally in favour of such secret groups among the students but the societies in the Jesuit colleges and other senior seminaries in the 17th century were normally the nucleus of the Sodality of Our Lady and as such were under the control of the director and had the approval of the rector of the college. These groups were known as the *L'Assemblée des Amis* (L'Aa), the Meeting of Friends, and their aim was two-fold: the spiritual welfare of the members and the pastoral care of their neighbour. The means recommended to achieve these related objectives are predictable in the main: particular application to achieving a fuller prayer life, the frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, the modelling of their lives on the example of Christ especially in the matter of evangelical poverty, and the cultivation of a simplicity of life style which was a prime consideration in the era of Louis XIV. The practice of mortification in the form of corporal penance was encouraged as well as undertaking menial tasks in hospitals, in the care of the sick and the poor. The rules of the Aa specifically required clerical members to refrain from wearing soutanes of the more ornate type and called for the removal of such trappings if already part of the garment they were wearing. For lay members, and there was place for such in the Aa, it was recommended that they renounce titles of nobility and posts of honour.²⁰

Fr. Bagot, SJ, who is reported as having been the first to have launched the Aa or La Société des Bons Amis among the senior students at the famous Jesuit college at La Flèche, later introduced the association at Clermont College (Louis le Grand) c.1640 when transferred there as professor of dogmatic theology. Its members were drawn entirely from among the theological students who were members of the Sodality of Our Lady. These would of course be mainly Jesuit students but there were others attending the theological lectures as boarders and even as day students. As these outsiders had not received any seminary training or formation, their behaviour and their approach to the priesthood often left much to be desired. One of the main motives then in launching a branch of the Aa was to provide a well trained elite among the student body themselves who would serve as a restraining and reforming influence among their peers. To achieve this objective a measure of secrecy was vital. The existence of such associations was not in itself a secret but the actual identity of the members was known only to the director of the sodality, to the president of the college and of course to the other members of the Aa. Their particular functions as reformers would be seriously hampered if their identity had been known to the other students. Another reason for secrecy in those days of an absolute monarchy and a society top heavy with titled persons who claimed the right to sit in on every council, was that there would be no possibility of excluding such titled people not merely from membership but from having their hands on the controls. Again this would totally negate the good work intended. No new member then could be coopted without all members having voted in his favour. This made not merely for quality among the members but also fostered a community of spirit – a *cor unum et anima una*, after the pattern of the early Christians. Indeed the first letters of these words c.u.e.a.u. became their secret logo.²¹

There had been a noticeable fall off in membership and activity of the Aa at Louis le Grand towards the close of the seventeenth century. Various reasons for this decline have been given,²² but a determining factor must have been the decrease in the number of outside students attending the theological course given by the Jesuits. The lack of a university degree at the end of the course was being felt as a serious disadvantage when it came to seeking a post of quality in the church. There were only about fifty students all told attending theology lectures. Not all of these were members of the sodality and very few were considered suitable for cooption into the Aa. In fact the number had dropped to four in 1699. The success

of the various sodality groups depended very much on the quality of the director appointed to the post. Some directors were known not to favour the existence of the inner core group – the Aa cells. The appointment of Fr. de La Beaune as director gave new hopes of a revival but soon after he was transferred to Rouen as rector. Then in 1700, Fr. Michael Le Tellier, professor of scripture, was appointed director of the sodality and from then on new life was breathed into the whole organisation.

Fr. Le Tellier was not a man to do things by half. He had begun his priestly life as professor of philosophy at St. Thomas' College, Rennes, where he also was director of the sodality, 1676-78. As Claude's mentor, Julien Bellier, was sixteen years of age in 1678 he would have been a member of the sodality for the second level students. In 1678 Le Tellier was transferred to Louis le Grand where he taught scripture during the next twenty five years. Intelligent, forceful and competent, his qualities made him an obvious choice as rector of the college in 1705 and in 1708 he was appointed provincial. The following year, on the death of Fr. de La Chaize, confessor and spiritual adviser to Louis XIV, Fr. Le Tellier was chosen to succeed him in that delicate capacity. His taking on the direction of the Aa in 1700 signalled action. So when Claude arrived at Louis le Grand the following year he was naturally seen by Le Tellier and by the members of the Aa as an obvious candidate. From scripture class Fr. Le Tellier would soon have recognised his intellectual quality and the students would have sensed his leadership potential at their level.

Apart from the regular meetings of the general sodality the Aa members held their own special sessions where as well as following a more concentrated menu of prayers and meditation they discussed plans of action. Because of his previous association with the sodality elsewhere Claude was automatically received as a member. For cooption into the Aa a longer period of probation would be required according to the rules but in his case the decision of admitting him came very early, perhaps again because of a former membership of the Aa in Nantes or within Fr. Bellier's group operating beside the des Places home in Rennes. In any case his name had to come up for discussion at three separate meetings and his candidature had to be approved by all. The qualities listed for observation would be his character, his propensity for getting involved in works of mercy and his capacity for keeping secret his involvement in the Aa. Then he would be asked to report to the director, Fr. Le Tellier, who after an interview in depth would present him with a copy of the very special manual and give him certain duties and instructions in preparation for his official enrollment in 8 days.

The manual had a special ceremonial to be observed for the admission of new members. The secret ceremony began with the singing of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, i.e. the sequence for the Mass for Pentecost Sunday. After the special allocution by the director, Fr. Le Tellier, Claude, kneeling with candle in hand in the presence of all the other members, recited four prayers in Latin, the first to his Guardian Angel, the second to St. Joseph and the third to St. Ignatius. Then followed a special prayer to Our Lady which took the form of a consecration. It would be very familiar to Claude already from his membership of the general sodality except for the addition of the pledge to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. This doctrine was as yet by no means accepted by all in the church but the Jesuits as a society were firmly committed to its defense. The prayer read by Claude was as follows:

Sancta Maria . . . Holy Mary, Mother of God and ever Virgin, I, Claude-Francis Poullart de Places, choose you today as my Sovereign, my Patroness

and my Advocate, I have decided and now firmly promise to defend your Holy and Immaculate Conception, never to do or say anything to your detriment, never to allow anyone dependent on me to do anything which dishonours you. I beseech you then to accept me as your servant for evermore. Assist me in all my actions and do not abandon me at the hour of my death. Amen.

As the whole thrust of the spirituality contained in the Aa manual could be summed up in the words "To Jesus via Mary" the centrepiece of the admission ceremony was the following total dedication to Jesus as Son of Mary:

Lord Jesus, since I am your servant, your servant and the son of your Maidservant, accept all my liberty, receive my memory, my intelligence and my will. All that I have or possess you have given it to me; I now give it back to your and deliver it entirely and without reserve to your will so that you may dispose of it. Grant me only that I may love you and the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Your Mother, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing else. You who live and reign etc..

The ceremony concluded with the singing of the Te Deum and all embraced Claude as a true brother.

The next stage was for Claude to choose a monitor or tutor from among the more senior members who would serve as his guide in the interpretation of the rules of the Aa and in the direction of his spiritual life generally. He was expected to be perfectly open with his spiritual guide and was to make out a rule of life for his inspection and approval, especially in the matter of any proposed acts of mortification. He was to report on his fidelity to that rule, on his interior dispositions and his failures. His guide in return was expected to lend him every support and encouragement in his problems. Apart from this close relationship with his monitor there were the regular weekly meetings and twice each year there were special renewal meetings of which we shall hear more later.

One of the main assets of the Aa was its manual. It has merited unstinted praise for the richness of its contents and for its being Christocentric. It contained fifty two meditations composed on an annual cycle with subjects suited to the various seasons and feasts of the liturgical year. These meditations were to have a profound influence on Claude and on his work.

CLAUDE'S PERSONAL REGULATION.

The influence of his membership of the Aa on Claude's life style was soon evident to his friends; the secret of his membership was so well kept by himself and by the other members that even his early biographers seem not to have been aware of it. Certainly they give no hint of it. It was only with the publication of the secret archives of the *Assemblée des Amis* in modern times that the fact of Claude's membership has become known and this discovery has enabled us to appreciate more fully the influences which shaped his life and thus to flesh out the meagre details which have been gleaned from his early biographers, Frs. Thomas and Besnard. But let us first see what Fr. Thomas has to tell us about the development which took place in Claude's prayer life:

He spent at least one hour in prayer in the morning... he meditated before every meal... He never left his room unless there was urgent reason without fortifying himself with prayer..

In the evening, as in the morning, he prayed for another hour, using both

vocal and mental prayer.. I do not mention the prayers he said every time he visited the Blessed Sacrament in whose presence he remained for a rather long time. He prayed even while walking in the streets...²³

Claude was but a private student at Collège Louis-le-Grand, residing in the separate section for the students attending the lectures in theology. These did not share the life and regulation of the Jesuit students for the priesthood, apart, that is, from attending the same course of studies. These non-Jesuit boarders were not necessarily subject to a special rule of life as they would be in a seminary catering not merely for their academic studies but also for their clerical formation. Most likely there was a priest specially appointed to look after their specific needs and to see that they were given certain guidelines as to the behaviour expected of them in the matter of discipline, style of life and religious practice. One can be sure they were also afforded some initiation in the ways of a regular prayer-life.²⁴

That there would be a timetable and a general set of rules for such clerical students is certain, especially in Paris where they were very conscious of being under the critical eye of the Cardinal Archbishop. It is also quite likely that each individual student was advised and even expected to draw up a personal rule of life to be submitted for approval to the director who would require a progress report.

So far we are talking about what one should expect given the climate of the age and the Jesuit tradition, but when it comes to Claude we are in the fortunate position that we have something more definite to go on from what he himself wrote and from other sources. It is abundantly clear that Claude did draw up a detailed regulation governing the various aspects of his life, especially in the matter of religious exercises. Also, we are sure that he took his rule seriously. He specifically asks the Lord in one of his prayers "for the grace of constancy and regularity in the observance of my little rules". That is the good news. The bad news is that only a fragment of the regulation is extant – rules nos. 12 (part of) to no. 16, all dealing with the prayers he has chosen to say at various junctures during the day.²⁵

The extant manuscript in Claude's own hand begins at Page 3, item no. 12, which deals with the prayers Claude has chosen for recital, probably before beginning his session of private study. Naturally various explanations have been volunteered for the absence of the rest of this document. It could just be due to one of those accidents which happen to all such collections of personal papers. It could also be that Claude set aside that part which served as a guide to the times and prayers that were his daily routine. Since the discovery, however, of his membership of the Aa, another hypothesis suggests itself. It was part of the unpublished rules of the Aa that all papers in the possession of individual members which referred to the Aa connection were to be destroyed or at least concealed that there was no possibility of their coming to the notice of non-members. It could be then that once Claude had submitted his completed rule to his monitor and had received approval for it he destroyed those sections which contained any reference to his connection with Aa activities. Those prayers which were to be found also in the general manual of the Sodality would not come under such restrictions. But even in the extant portions of his regulations one can discover distinct echoes of the Aa manual. The name of the first prayer is missing, but from the subsequent comment and from what he prescribed later in his rule for the students of his seminary (No. 30) it is clear that he has been referring to the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* or Come O Holy Spirit; fill the hearts of the faithful etc. The text begins: "...and the *Sancta Maria* to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to ask for the protection of the Blessed Virgin". The *Sancta Maria* was undoubtedly the prayer

quoted earlier and used in the Marian societies which existed in all Jesuit colleges, a prayer therefore which would have a special significance for Claude from his earliest days. But it would now have a new significance for him as part of his consecration to Mary in a special way through his membership of the Aa. In some versions of the prayer, St Joseph, Spouse of the Virgin, is coupled with Our Lady as patron and advocate. Item no. 12 ends with the words: However, for all these prayers I will not take more time than a quarter of an hour.

No. 13 deals with Morning Prayer and we are fortunate to have the full text. Once again Claude starts with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, followed by an unidentified prayer frequently used by him beginning "My God I take the liberty...". This may well have been a prayer of his own composition. Then he recited 3 Our Fathers and 3 Hail Marys – "the first in honour of the Blessed Trinity, the second in honour of the Blessed Virgin prescribed by the little habit – (this may refer to the prayers associated with the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel), the third in honour of my guardian angel asking him to assist me continually with his advice and to obtain for me a happy death".

As this is the second time Claude has mentioned the grace of a happy death, and the topic is to come up again, one wonders if he had some premonition that death for him was to come sooner rather than later. But Claude is not concerned merely by his own parting from this life to meet God; he continues: I will add a De Profundis (Ps 129) for the repose of the souls in purgatory. Again he mentions the Sancta Maria prayer from the Marian sodality and adds this brief biographical note which we have cited in an earlier chapter: "...so as to as to put myself in a special way under the protection of the Blessed Virgin whose privileged child I used to be, having been dedicated to her by my parents. In her honour they dressed me in white for the first seven years of my life".

So far his prayers have been expressed in formulae handed down, but he now transcribes for us what is a very revealing prayer of his own composition. It incapsulates, as it were, his own creed, his aspirations and the priorities which are to shape his life.

PRAYER TO THE TRINITY

The first significant point about this self-composed prayer is that it is explicitly addressed to the Blessed Trinity, "whom through the gift of God's grace he is called on to adore with all his being". That, then, is the anchor of all else. He goes on then to enumerate his own poor prayers for his personal sanctification. He thinks also of the sanctification of others, – first the members of his own family, then all his friends; but he also includes his enemies. Acknowledging the imperfection of his own personal prayers he associates his petitions with the Eucharist being offered in the name of the whole church. He then spells, out in more detail the graces he needs from the Lord – an increase in the gift of faith, the virtues of humility, chastity, constancy in doing good, a love of the cross and contempt of the world's opinion of him. Above all he prays for a vivid and abiding consciousness of Christ's life, sufferings and death. Recalling that he has wasted so much of his life on things other than what God wanted of him, and in order to belong entirely to God, he asks to be deprived of all earthly things and all attachment to them.

On the positive side he begs that he be favoured with the gift of the love of God, the love of Our Lady, the grace of knowing the will of God for him and to have his heart and mind centred on the Lord so that he might be able to live continually in

his presence. He asks to be rid of the obstacles to this union, namely all forms of sin but especially his pride. Again as motives to move the Lord, as it were, he bases his requests on the blood shed by Christ out of love, and the perpetual offering of his sacrifice in the Eucharist throughout the ages. He appeals as well to the efficacy of all the prayers offered by holy people down the ages, these prayers being ever present to the Lord and shared in through the communion of saints by all Christians. But above all he puts his faith in the mediation of the Blessed Virgin on his behalf.²⁶

This very personal and unconventional prayer, which he uses on other occasions and in different forms, is marked by three main features: that he addresses himself directly to the Blessed Trinity, his wish to be enveloped in Christ's life at all times, his confidence in Our Lady to see that his heart is guided aright and that he persevere in his resolutions.

For Claude to direct his self-composed prayer to the Blessed Trinity is so unusual that one is tempted to search around for some possible explanation. He was after all but a beginner in such matters and must have been influenced by something brought to his notice which took on a special significance for him. One possible explanation may be found in an occurrence which he had watched at close range during his final years at Rennes. In 1691 a religious community, 'The Daughters of Our Lady of Charity' or the *Magdelonnettes*, acquired possession of a ruined priory off rue de la Cordonnorie just across from where M. des Places was consolidating his commercial empire and laying the foundations for his family mansion. When the sisters had refurbished their premises, providing a home for girls in distress, they set about building a new church which they dedicated to the Blessed Trinity. Henceforth they were to be known locally as 'The Trinitarians' and the area is still known as Place de la Trinité. It may well be that Claude was in some way associated with the ceremony of the dedication of that church and the prayer composed for the occasion would have meant much to him as he was embarking on his new career.²⁷

One of the most frequently read spiritual authors of the day was Fr. H.M. Boudon, a former member of the Aa at Louis le Grand. Among his best known works were two devoted to the Blessed Trinity. As Boudon's writings were well known to Grignon de Montfort it is not unlikely that Claude was also familiar with his works.

The Aa manual, true to its inspiration taken from Lallemand, has a section treating of the relationship between Mary and the three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

One must not forget, however, that Claude's prayer was written soon after his experience of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Karl Rahner has written in his study of the Exercises when speaking of the Trinitarian model of approach to union with God:

This Trinitarian way was essential to the attitude of St Ignatius; it is the basis of his piety and we meet it in every turn in his Spiritual Exercises.²⁸

No. 14 of his regulation gives in detail again the prayers he had selected for recital at evening time – part to be said in the privacy of his room and part in a college chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, somewhere in the vicinity of the classrooms. This section reads as follows:

As regards evening prayer, after a quarter of an hour's examination of conscience in my room I will recite the litany of the Blessed Virgin, three

Our Fathers, three Hail Marys and the Creed. For those prayers I will allot half an hour. Then in front of the Blessed Sacrament I will recite the litany of the most holy name of Jesus, the *De Profundis*, the *Sancta Maria* etc. and the prayer written above. For these prayers I will allow another half-hour.

The 'prayer written above' most probably refers to the one composed by himself addressed to the Trinity, but it could also refer to one of the special prayers proper to the Aa.

No. 15. It was not only at the beginning and close of day that Claude had set times aside to speak formally to the Lord. His private room was his cell to which he returned not merely to be on his own but to be with the Lord. He proposes never to leave or enter his room – except in case of urgent business, without going on his knees to express his desire to be in the presence of the Lord. Again for this occasion he composed his own prayer, repeating in shorter and more ordered form what he had spelt out in full at morning prayer. This shorter prayer again opens with the direct apostrophe to the Blessed Trinity to whom he acknowledges that all adoration is due as his priority. He then goes on to ask for the grace to be able to live totally in thought, word, and deed in the presence of the Lord. He sums up in the words: May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly as I should. Then follow three crosses marked in the manuscript possibly to indicate that he signed himself three times with the cross as he said the ejaculations which were not uncommon at the time: My Jesus be for us a Jesus (i.e. a Saviour); My Jesus be for me eternally a Jesus; Be eternally in me and I in you. He concludes this prayer, as on previous occasions, by offering his mind and heart to Jesus through Mary:

Most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through your holy grace with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength, I beg you to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not saying, thinking, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what you want me to do and say. Grant me all these graces, my God, together with your most holy blessing. May my mind and heart be filled with you alone. May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly to you as I should. + + + My Jesus, be for us eternally a Jesus; my Jesus, be for me eternally a Jesus; be eternally in me and I in you! I place my mind and heart in your hands through the most holy Virgin. In the name of my Jesus and Mary.²⁹

Incidentally, the invocation "In the name of Jesus and Mary" may be a throw back to the earliest prayer Claude had ever seen in writing, namely the words wrought in large iron letters on the rear wall of the Benedictine Abbey of St George in Rennes just beside where he was baptised. Some of these letters are still in position. – (Jesus Ma..)

No. 16, the final item in this Fragments of a Personal Regulation underlines the fact that Claude was trying to interlace his various activities with a prayerful return to the Lord in a general attempt to live in the presence of the Lord at all times. His first commitment after Mass and breakfast was attendance at the moral theology lecture – "cases of conscience", as it was then called. He made it part of his rule that he make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament en route and also during the interval before the dogmatic theology lectures began. He indicates the short prayers he has chosen for recital during these brief visits by quoting the opening words which help us to identify them. First is *Ave Salus Mundi, Verbum* (Hail, thou Word, Salvation of the world) – a prayer used in some liturgies at the elevation of the host during mass. 2) We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, and we praise you,

because by your cross you have redeemed the world. This prayer was among those contained in the manual of the Marian societies. 3) May the body and blood of Christ preserve me for eternal life (From the liturgy of the mass, used by the priest before communion). 4) A prayer similar to that used in no. 15 asking for Jesus' blessing.³⁰

The prayers Claude used before meals are not recorded in these extant fragments but he refers to them in his later notes about his state of prayer at this period.

One might be left with the impression that Claude's prayer-life at this stage consisted mostly in reciting a multiplicity of vocal prayers. Nothing could be further from the truth. That he recited a goodly number of the vocal prayers in use in the universal church and some that were of local usage, is true. He is obviously a young man beginning to take his spiritual life and devotional practices much more seriously than he had done while trying to live a good Christian life in the world. He may well have been advised by his director to follow a tight schedule of prayer at this stage in order to accustom himself to living in an ambience of prayer. The time would come, naturally, when he would be able to fly in the ways of prayer without the aid of this multiplicity of vocal prayers and special times. By then he would have advanced in the way of interior prayer, keeping in more direct contact with the Lord in his own heart as taught by his spiritual director and led by the Holy Spirit. That this was already happening we are left in no doubt. We shall have the opportunity to eavesdrop on Claude's inner prayer life as described in his own notes when he reaches a critical stage in that development.

It was reported about Claude at this period that he "makes eight visits to the Blessed Sacrament daily and receives Holy Communion three times a week.."

Receiving Holy Communion three times a week is singled out as being out of the ordinary at that time, even for a clerical student. To appreciate the background of this judgement one has to take into account not merely the proscribed teaching of Jansenists but also the regular teaching of many theologians and spiritual authors whose orthodoxy was above question. Some like St Ignatius Loyola had tried to revive the practice of the early church in encouraging frequent and even daily communion among the faithful. The Council of Trent set forth the doctrinal basis for this approach and pastors were encouraged in the Catechism of the Council to instruct the faithful on the efficacy of taking daily spiritual food as well as corporal food. Yet Jesuit theologians were among those who discouraged approaching the sacrament more frequently than once a week except in cases where the confessor judged the advisability and utility of more frequent communion for a particular individual. Members of religious orders were of course expected to follow their rule in this matter and superiors were allowed latitude for individual cases. We read in the life of Grignon de Montfort that he was allowed to receive Holy Communion 4 times a week when he was a student in Saint-Sulpice Seminary. Yet St Vincent de Paul could complain: "You hardly see anyone going to communion on the first Sunday of the month or on Feast Days, or very few, and not more in religious communities". The elitist approach of the Jansenists had persuaded many that frequent Holy Communion was a privilege to be reserved only for the few who were given the grace of perfect dispositions: it was in their view more of a reward than a remedy in the spiritual life. To counteract this misguided approach to the sacraments, various devotions such as the Forty Hours, Perpetual Adoration, devotion to the Sacred Heart were encouraged, but it was not till the age of Pope Pius X that the rigorism of the past centuries in this matter was finally ousted.³¹

It is against the background of this climate of opinion and practice that one is to judge Claude's own words about his approach to receiving the Lord in

Holy Communion. Writing later about the “great number of God’s blessings” he experienced at this time he says:

These were made manifest by the eagerness with which I approached the Blessed Sacrament of the altar. Although I had the privilege of receiving Holy Communion frequently, it was not as often as I would have liked. I longed for the sacred bread with such avidity that when I began to eat it I often found it impossible to stem the torrents of tears. It was from partaking of Jesus’ body that I drew the detachment which led me to despise the world and its ways. I cared little for its esteem and even tried sometimes to displease it by contravening its conventions. Jesus Christ crucified was the subject which most frequently occupied my mind.³²

Next we turn to Fr. Thomas who is in his proper element when dealing specifically with Claude’s spiritual development rather than providing the reader with mundane facts about his daily activities which we value so highly to-day.

When dealing with the Ignatian retreat done in Rennes which led to Claude’s ‘conversion’ and his choice of a state in life, Fr. Thomas added this comment: “During the retreat he had the grace of conceiving a special liking for vocal prayer, but he developed an even greater taste for mental prayer...”. We transcribe first what Fr. Thomas has to say about Claude’s frequent practice of oral prayer because, though he may not add much in the way of detail not already found in Claude’s own notes, his testimony has an extra value in that he lived in close contact with Claude for several years: so the points he stresses will have the stamp of authenticity that might not come so surely from a later writer:

After his retreat he continued making his meditation with the same regularity. He spent at least one hour at it in the morning after getting up, and he meditated before every meal. “I was,” he himself said, “faithful to my exercises and I would have considered it one of the greatest crimes to take my meals, no matter how busy I was, without first nourishing the soul with the salutary food obtained in meditation”.

He never left his room unless there were very urgent reasons, without fortifying himself with prayer. Similarly, he never returned to his room without having purified himself in prayer. Undoubtedly, the reader will be edified by the prayer he was accustomed to say on those occasions and several will be inclined to imitate Claude in this regard. For this reason I see no objection to reproducing it here. It will be observed that he composed it during his retreat and that he partially expresses his sentiments in it.

Fr. Thomas then gives us the shorter version of Claude’s prayer beginning “Most Blessed Trinity”. One notices slight deviations from the text found in Claude’s own extant manuscript. These slight changes could well be due to different versions all emanating from Claude or may be the result of Fr. Thomas doing a tidying up job on the uncorrected original. He seems to take it for granted that the version he transcribes had been composed by Claude during the 1701 retreat. Fr. Thomas continues with his comments:

One can easily recognize here the language of a heart that has learned during retreat what virtues one must have to converse with the world safely and without losing the advantages of solitude.

In the evening, as in the morning, he prayed for another hour using both vocal and mental prayer. I do not mention the prayers which he said every

time he visited the Blessed Sacrament in whose presence he often remained for a rather long time. Briefly, he spent the better part of the day in prayer. He prayed even while walking in the streets and he was disturbed as soon as he noticed that he had forgotten the presence of Him whom alone he wanted to love.³³

Fr. Thomas concludes this section by giving a resumé of the most salient themes which come through from the vocal prayers used by Claude, from the intentions for which he prayed, and from the comments he has added:

Three things formed the ordinary subject of his meditations. First, his sins, and he regularly began with them, often even spending on that topic the entire time allotted to the exercise. Yet it was not the fear of punishment nor the consideration of hell that touched his heart, but the thought of God's goodness and his own ingratitude. The more he considered his sins, the greater they appeared to him. Their malice increased in his meditation and he always found a laver of them in the gift of tears which God had given him.

The second thing on which he meditated with the greatest profit was the Passion of Our Divine Lord, a subject of love and gratitude for souls that have been truly converted. He never tired of it and he experienced with a keen consolation what was expressed by St. Augustine: "Nothing is more salutary than the daily consideration of the Passion of the Saviour" (Sermo 33). Hence poverty, humiliation, sorrow, contempt, labour and martyrdom itself, had nothing in them that could frighten this man who bore Jesus crucified in his heart.

The third thing which formed the subject of his most consoling meditations was the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. The love of his God sensibly permeated him at such times and prompted him to surrender unreservedly to Him who so entirely gave Himself to him. From this sprang his eagerness to unite himself to his God in Holy Communion, which we will consider somewhat more in detail after finishing the matter of his meditations. One can readily see by all that has been said, that if Claude's meditations were so fruitful, it was because he made them with so much care and attended to them with such perfect dispositions. He had courageously embraced external mortification and self-abnegation. He refused to his senses the most legitimate satisfactions. He no longer cared about the opinion of the world, or about what the world might say of him. He despised it fully and was glad to be despised by it. He was occupied solely with what was able to unite him to God. He strove to walk always in God's presence and in fact almost never thought of anything else.

In the presence of such dispositions it was impossible that God, who is infinitely more eager to do us good than we are to receive His gifts, would not have conversed with him and would not have taken pleasure in enriching him with graces and favours. His heart was empty of creatures, so God naturally communicated Himself most specially to it, freeing him, during the beginning of his conversion, from the distraction, boredom, and the dryness of which imperfect souls complain and which God permits to punish them for their attachment to the vanities of this world and to that self-love of which they refuse to make a generous sacrifice.

Moreover, His servant asked Him only what could contribute to His greater glory.³⁴

Before going on to review the gifts given Claude in his inner prayer life at this period we turn instead to the story of the work which the Spirit led him to undertake in order to contribute to the greater Glory of God.

PASTORAL WORK

We have seen that the second objective of the Aa was to foster a pastoral outlook by getting the students actively involved in work for their neighbours in need. This was considered a normal consequence of their striving to model their lives on the life of Christ. This outlook was actually spelt out in the special book of meditations composed for the members of the Sodality of Our Lady and published in book form in Paris in 1654. Here are some extracts from this book entitled: *Practice of Devotion and Christian virtues according to the Rules of the Congregations of Our Lady*:

Love for Jesus cannot be idle; it passes from the heart to the hands, from affection to action – otherwise it is not love. (p.90). There is no greater proof of the love we have for God than that which we have for our neighbour, who, by a glorious substitution of the dying Jesus, has taken his place on earth in order to be the nearest and most immediate object of our affections. (p.92).

And as among our brothers the most destitute are the dearest to our father and good mother, it is they also who will be the objects of our affection: the poor, the sick, the afflicted, to whom I would add the sinners. (p.93).³⁵

The sodality for the students in rhetoric and philosophy was conducted principally by Fr. Langeois well known for his publications on church history. The chosen members of his sodality could be seen regularly going in pairs accompanied by a professed member of the society from the neighbouring community of St. Anthony as they visited the poor bringing with them gifts of food and clothing from the Jesuits. The students also contributed to these alms from their own pocket money. The more senior among them were taken to the hospital for incurables where they learned to care for the sick.³⁶

Theology students had also their own sodality under different direction. It was normally only at this level that the Aa cells were fostered and among the sodalities for past students and other outside members. The prayer meetings and the apostolic and social work would be a continuation of what the students had already been accustomed to in the previous groupings but with the addition of undertakings that called for more maturity. The director of this group was in a highly responsible position as he was part of the formation team initiating these young men into aspects of pastoral life in view of the priesthood. Some of the outdoor activities were in fact part of the pastoral work of the local parish of St. Benedict to which the past student members belonged.

We single out three activities in which Claude is on record as having been involved. We start with what called for the greatest heroism at times, namely the visitation of the sick, especially those in hospital where the Aa members in particular were committed to perform the most menial chores, emptying out the slops, scrubbing the floors, dressing the beds, caring for the personal needs of the patients at a time when standards in hygiene, sanitation etc left so much to be desired in many hospitals. Then there was the apostolate of trying to cope with the ever prevalent pauperism, not in any sense as crusaders for social justice, nor in the allocation of sizeable material aid, which they did not possess, but in the care for the individual, the stress on evangelisation and sanctification; in short by a genuine display of solidarity at personal level with the marginalised in society.³⁷ This brought the better-off students into contact with real poverty

at close range for the first time and influenced them to adopt a more simple life-style for themselves. The more heroic among them shared what they had with the poor. Finally there was the work of catechising the uninstructed masses. There was a great lack in this matter of teaching the poorer classes in the cities and in the country the elements of the faith. Members of the Aa were encouraged to get involved in teaching catechism at the special centres set up in the suburbs and in country towns and to help at the retreats and special courses for training catechists.³⁸

When Fr. Thomas recounts briefly Claude's various pastoral activities he would have looked upon them as the natural flowering of what he had learned from l'Abbé Bellier and his associates in Rennes; he may have been unaware of the special guidance, motivation and support received through membership of the Aa. But we are glad to have the few details Fr. Thomas has preserved for his readers:

At that time he had already a special love for the most obscure and most neglected works. From time to time he gathered the young Savoyards and taught them catechism on every occasion. He felt sure that their souls were no less dear to Jesus Christ than those of the most powerful noblemen and that he could count as much or even more on the fruitfulness of the instructions he gave them.³⁹

Fr. Thomas cannot resist the opportunity to moralise on this engaging incident in Claude's first pastoral involvement, but before following him on his lofty flight we delay on the 'young Savoyards' whom Claude had learned from meditation on his Divine Master to value as highly as the noble folk who were intended by his parents to be his own associates in the type of career planned for him since his baptism.

These young boys were from the mountain areas of Savoy, then an independent duchy in the south east of France. They had come to Paris in search of a profitable occupation, principally as chimney sweeps. Sheer economic necessity had driven them from home. They were welcomed by the people of Paris both for their vital services and for their good humour and songs as they went about their suffocating chores. They were featured in several literary works being presented in a romantic light, but the cruel fact was that they were the victims of neglect and exploitation because of their poverty, their youth, and the fact that they were removed so far from their native habitats.⁴⁰ Because they moved from place to place as their services were required, they were no one's pastoral responsibility. There were, however, some people who made a special effort to cater for their needs, spiritual as well as temporal, particularly in the parish of St Benedict where a special centre was set up at the Ursuline convent with catechism classes arranged for Sundays and Tuesday evenings. Students from the various clerical colleges were invited to help in the catechising of these unfortunates. It was in this context that Claude got involved with the little Savoyards very early on. One can well imagine that his experience at Saint Yves' hospital and orphanage must have prepared him for this task being undertaken once again under the auspices of the Sodality of Our Lady. It would appear that he was commissioned to undertake this task singlehanded and on a regular basis – probably till they were ready for confirmation at Pentecost 1702. What a contrast these grimy youths must have presented for Claude with his own home circumstances when he grew up dressed in white in honour of his consecration to Our Lady. But now as a member of the Sodality of Our Lady he was living out to the full the logical consequences of that consecration as was insisted on with such clarity in the meditations printed in the manual for the members of the sodality.

Claude in this exercise in catechising was learning to adapt the intellectual approach to theology as taught in the lecture room to the needs of his youthful listeners, a training in how to bring the Good News to the poor and the unwashed. How successful was he at this level of catechising which was so far removed from his performance during *Le Grand Acte* (Grand Act) at Rennes? Fr. Thomas, who knew Claude personally, simply but eloquently answers our query when he wrote: "One could not but admire the easy and kind manner with which he drew them to goodness". Earlier he had remarked that he had attended to their spiritual and their bodily needs. And in all this work he was activated by no mere humanist or socialist ideology but, as Fr. Thomas has reminded us, he was guided and inspired by the conviction that the souls of these little waifs were as precious to the good Lord as the souls of the mighty on their thrones.

Expanding on this succinct insight Fr. Thomas wrote as follows:

Besides, in this he also followed the example of his beloved Master who had come to preach the gospel to the poor. In order to repay God, for he believed he had served Him so badly until then, he was ready to do anything to give Him faithful servants. And since our Saviour came to redeem sinners, Claude's ardent zeal was prepared to undertake anything that might help in bringing them back to God. Nothing, he tells us, would have seemed beneath him if it could serve as a means of winning them. This shows the marvellous power of grace which seemed to have given him a new heart, not by removing the obstacles that were posed by his natural inclinations, but by encouraging him in generously overcoming them.⁴¹

THE POOR STUDENTS

Claude did not have to go outside the precincts of Louis le Grand to come in contact with real and particularly humiliating poverty. Some of the students availing of the gratuitousness of the lectures in philosophy and theology as they had set their hearts on the priesthood, showed obvious signs of their poverty in their dress and lack of sufficient nourishment or suitable lodgings. One recalls Grignion de Montfort coming across such a poor scholar at St Thomas' College in Rennes who was the butt of the jokes of the other students because of the rags he was wearing.⁴² Grignion began on that occasion by organising a collection among the students to help clothe that impoverished aspirant to the priesthood. Claude, on seeing a very young student in similar straits at Louis le Grand, came to his aid secretly from his own limited pocket money. We are fortunate that this first clerical student befriended by Claude, J.B. Faulconnier, left a testimony to this spontaneous act of charity. Writing later in life, when he was pastor in a small parish in the diocese of Orleans, he testified:

I know that about a year before he founded his community he paid for the cost of my board in a private house for some three or four months from where I was able to attend class at the Jesuits. After these three or four months he arranged that I be accommodated at a community belonging to these religious. During all that time he sent me to different addresses to bring alms to people who would be embarrassed if it were known that they were in such need.. And I know that before he established his community and while he was still boarding with the Jesuits, whether he used have to collect his own rations or had them brought to his apartments I am not sure, but I know for certain that he used to give these to people who were in dire want and fend for himself from the scraps left over from the Jesuits' meals...⁴³

THE TOULOUSE LETTER

Faulconnier's letter is a valuable document in that it is from a contemporary, the first student in fact of the seminary Claude was soon to found though as yet he had not even dreamt of the like. But this document, valuable though it be, was written years after the event, probably at the request of Fr. Thomas when he was in the process of composing his biography of Claude. No actual contemporary document referring to Claude's life at this period had come to light till 1968 when Yves Poutet, specialist in documents concerning St. John Baptist De La Salle, spotted references in the Toulouse Aa archives which he recognised as referring clearly to Claude. Poutet's discovery was a milestone in the study of the life and work of Claude not because of the amount of the new material it provided. In fact it was because much of the material was already known that it was possible to state beyond doubt that the subject referred to was Claude. The value of the identification was that for the first time it was revealed that Claude had been an active member of the Aa. This discovery immediately opened up a new perspective and threw a revealing light on the meagre facts already known about this period of Claude's life leading to his launching into his work on behalf of the poor students for the priesthood. There were, of course, some valuable new details in these Toulouse papers beyond what was already known about Claude.⁴⁴

First let us clear up briefly the matter about how details on Claude's activities should have turned up in far away Toulouse. As part of the revival within the Aa at Louis le Grand from 1700 on, the custom was resumed of sending a circular letter about their activities to the other Aa groups which had in fact been founded from Paris. This letter dated March 1703 was in fact the first of its type since 1699. After volunteering some excuses for this long lapse the writer proceeds to give extracts from their secret register of the good deeds done by members of their group and which had been submitted anonymously to the secretary at the two special reunions held each year, one at Pentecost and the other on 27 December, Feast of St. John the Evangelist. Two of the extracts, Nos. III and IX are incontestably referring to Claude and a third, No. VIII, is almost certainly referring to him also as we shall see later. The fact that three such extracts from Claude's submissions have been included in this digest from the group's records show clearly the importance attached to his contributions.

From internal evidence Père Michel has been able to put the entries about Claude in their proper chronological sequence – No. VIII coming from the Christmas reunion 1701, No. III from the following Pentecost meeting and No. IX from Christmas 1702.⁴⁵ We transcribe here entry no. III, dated Pentecost 1702:

Another (confrère) pays for the upkeep and lodgings of a poor scholar; he buys old clothes to clothe other poor people; the same confrere makes eight visits to the Blessed Sacrament daily and receives Holy Communion three times a week; he often visits the hospitals; twice a week he gives instruction to twenty poor chimneysweeps and also helps them materially; he charitably admonishes the confreres who neglect their duties; he drinks only water and eats very little, never what is to his own taste.⁴⁶

A comment on some of the points raised in this Aa report is in order. First it will be of interest to know the amount of pocket money at Claude's disposal at this time once he had paid his fees and other costs at Louis le Grand. The annual fee at the college was 368 *livres* (pounds) which included 36 for the use of a private room. There were other 'extras' not included in the basic fee.⁴⁷ For a fuller comment on this aspect of Claude's life we turn to Fr. Thomas who, as is his wont, gives

us the minimum of fact on which he builds quite a sizeable sermon intended no doubt for his principal audience, the seminarians:

A heart that was so generous and so sensitive to the love of its God made sure it would not fail to show proper gratitude to Him who had held out a saving hand, and this sentiment found expression on every occasion. He found great comfort in being able to console the Lord in the persons of the poor who are members of His Mystical Body. For them he stripped himself of all that he could, even of necessary things. His thrifty father accorded him an allowance of a mere 800 livres – a moderate allowance for a young man of his age. Nevertheless, he found it possible to give a great part of that amount to the poor. He liberally helped the self-conscious poor and had a wonderful way of sparing them all embarrassment. Among other things, for this work of charity he used the services of a young student whose board he paid until a Jesuit house took him in. But since he had to use most of the money given him by his father for his own board and lodging, he took, as we have seen, the best of what the college furnished him for his own sustenance and sent it to the sick or the reticent poor, thus treating himself less well than the least of them.

Before his conversion, Claude used to feel that the allowance accorded him by his father was insufficient for his needs. After his conversion, he found it ample and even had something left over to be devoted to the needs of many others. This shows how charity coupled with mortification makes one ingeniously see in what is necessary for himself a sort of superfluity which ought to be bestowed on the poor. He desired to be entirely destitute some day after he had given everything away and live on nothing but alms.⁴⁸

Fr. Besnard devotes just one brief paragraph to this aspect of Claude's story. We transcribe it here for the sake of completing the record:

From this time on he consecrated his savings and part of what he himself needed to make it possible for some poor students to continue their studies. He went so far as to give half of his own food to one of them who lived at the entrance of the college. In this way he foreshadowed what he was soon to do with such great zeal that its fruits continue to exist at present.⁴⁹

Returning to the Aa report, we find that it adds a detail about Claude's activities not found elsewhere namely: "He charitably admonishes the confrères who neglect their duties". At first hand this disclosure might leave the reader with the impression that Claude had by now taken on airs and roles which would leave him open to the charge of acting as a self appointed reformer with a 'better than thou' outlook on his peers. He was after all just a student and not a 'prefect' in any sense. But once it is realised that he was by now coopted into the Aa this 'charitable admonishing' of those who neglected their duties was exactly what would be expected from him. One of the main purposes in having a cell of the Aa established at Louis le Grand was to provide such a salutary influence among the loosely governed student body who lived apart from the Jesuit aspirants. The members of the Aa were specifically counselled that their methods were to be tempered by moderation and to avoid all abrasiveness in dealing with unapproved behaviour among the students and to practice tolerance in combating unorthodox views. Hence the significance of the inclusion of the word 'charitably' admonished. Indeed this tolerant and humane approach to the defaulter was to be the singular trait of Claude in his direction of the seminarians under his care in the

community he was soon to found, and it is to be sensed in the rule he drew up for their guidance.

But Claude's efforts in "charitably exhorting the confreres who neglect their duties" must have been directed in a special way towards his fellow members in the Aa, all of whom he would have known from the meetings. The ideals being set before them were high indeed and ordinary mortals do not scale the heights without encouragement. It could well be that it was in no small measure due to Claude's efforts that the writer of the 1703 letter to Toulouse could give such a progress report:

...Our ordinary meetings are being attended in good numbers this year and our renewal sessions have been held strictly according to the rules and with fervour; our pilgrimages have been a source of edification. As we returned from our latest one to Montmartre held on Shrove Tuesday, where at least 31 took part, everyone returned full of sorrow to see how the good God is so offended during this time of debauchery and full of desire to counteract each in his own way this unbridled behaviour and to make reparation for the outrages against Jesus Christ by their own good example and good works. ...

Later when Claude was going through a spiritual crisis one of the matters he confessed to have neglected as time went on was this duty of charitably admonishing the confreres!

Finally, the 'edifying note', included in the 1703 report by the secretary of the Aa, has this detail about Claude's much changed life style: "He drinks only water, eats very little and never what is to his own taste." One can see that already the other members of the Assemblée have noted Claude as being exceptional in his austere style of living. This abstemiousness and mortification in the matter of food and drink is confirmed from other sources including Claude's own personal notes. Writing a few years later he added euphemistically: "I began to do some violence to my likings and to impose small mortifications". J.B Faulconnier when dealing with Claude's mortification in the matter of feeding himself after parting with his rations, adds a detail which sounds positively shocking to squeamish tastes: "He used eat what was thrown aside after the Jesuits' meals, in particular haricot beans which had already been covered in two inches of mould". And Fr. Thomas confirms these accounts of the extremes to which Claude had gone at this period in this matter of mortification of his appetites.⁵⁰ Just a year earlier in 1701 Claude had written in his retreat notes at Rennes that he feared his tendency to "a soft and cowardly life" and that he looked forward to entering a seminary "where piety reigned" so that he could change his easygoing habits. Within that twelve months he seems to have already undergone an extraordinary change indeed, not merely in his external way of life but in his inner self and in his outlook. Fr. Thomas just refers to this phenomenon as his 'conversion' as if that explained all. Later we shall examine in what this conversion consisted and see in more detail how it affected his life. But first we shall see how Claude was led by events to discover his true vocation.

Founder 1703

Another confrère has left a benefice of 4000 pounds (livres) and a position of councillor in parliament that his parents wanted to give him, in order instead to become director of a seminary where he will experience only troubles and fatigue....

These words appear in the secret report sent to various centres throughout France by the secretary of the *Assemblée des Amis* in Paris on 17 March 1703. There is no doubt about the identity of this unnamed confrère: he could be none other than Claude. The big surprise, given the date 17 March 1703, is that already, a year and a half after his arrival in Paris and while yet four and a half years away from his ordination, he is referred to as “director of a seminary”. That this news item does not readily make sense to us today, is an indication of the great changes that have taken place in the training of future priests since Claude’s time, changes that he and others like him have helped bring about. To understand then what Claude had undertaken and to appreciate his motives, we have not merely to collate the meagre facts which have been recorded about Claude’s particular initiative but we have to look at the wider context within which he was operating.

LACK OF SEMINARIES

A century and a half had passed since the Council of Trent (1545-63) had set out to restructure the Church in the aftermath of the Reformation. To restate the church’s theological position was a priority, but certain practical requirements were called for to make sure that these theological theses were not filed merely for discussion by future theologians. A compendium in the form of a popular manual had to be produced to assist the pastors in the field. Above all serious planning had to be set in motion to ensure the proper formation of these pastors. A decree was formulated (*Cum adolescentium aetas . . .*) calling for the setting up of seminaries for the training of all candidates for the priesthood, but giving priority to candidates from the poorer classes and stipulating that these be educated free of charge; the burden of their education was to be borne by the faithful as a normal part of their Christian duties.

Due in part to the poverty of the means of communication in those days and to the difficulty in changing structures, especially during the troubled conditions caused by the religious conflicts, very little progress had been made in the matter of setting up seminaries of the type advocated by the fathers of the Council even after a hundred years.

Because of the Penal Laws in countries like England, Ireland and Scotland there was no realistic possibility of setting up such seminaries in spite of the pioneering work done in this area by Cardinal Pole as early as 1556. Candidates for the priesthood in these countries had to rely on the facilities provided for them in Catholic nations on mainland Europe, particularly France. The problems of those emigrant students were special and daunting in the extreme. Hostel type colleges were eventually provided by charitable sources to house them while they attended lectures in philosophy and theology at local recognised institutes. Many of these

students were attending lectures in the various colleges in the Latin Quarter in Paris which were part of the complex of the University and in time all three nations were to have their separate colleges.¹

For the native French aspirants to the priesthood the situation was not much different. There were no special centres for the formation of future priests as there had been in earlier centuries when there was normally such a school run in connection with the cathedral. The rise of the universities as centres of third level education tended to undermine that earlier tradition. Candidates for the priesthood attended lectures at colleges approved by a university or conducted by major religious orders mainly for their own aspirants. There was no obligation for candidates to attend any course in clerical training. They just presented themselves at the regular examinations for entry to major orders, that is the three recognised steps to ordination which were normally separated by periods of one year. The successful candidates were then "called" by the bishop for ordination. It was only a century after the Council of Trent that any serious effort had been made to provide seminaries and enforce regulations demanding that prospective candidates attend such institutes for a specified but limited period prior to entry into each major order. The legislation for such seminaries for ordinands did not come all at once. Much depended on the local bishop and the availability of satisfactory resources. Such progress as had been made was in the main due to the initiative of courageous and dedicated individuals. In Italy St Charles Borromeo made such a beginning at Milan, but it was in France that the greatest strides were made by men like St Vincent de Paul, St John Eudes and M. Olier, the founder of Saint Sulpice.² This was a step in the right direction but it catered only for those already well advanced on the road to the priesthood, and understandably these institutions took in only such students as could pay their way. The call by the Council for seminaries to educate free of charge the financially deprived candidates, met with a more sluggish response.

Little progress had been achieved by the middle of the 17th century with drastic results for the pastoral life of the church, especially in rural districts, in the poorer areas in towns and in ministries where total commitment, sacrifice and evangelical poverty were called for on the part of pastors. Such posts were neglected in the scramble for the more remunerative type, partly as the passport to a good living for the incumbent but also under pressure from the candidates' family who, having made sacrifices for their son's education, now considered themselves entitled to look to the ordained member to make his financial contribution towards the education of the other members. As a result of this situation the church suffered loss as the faithful were widely neglected. The aspirants to the priesthood from among the poorer classes suffered severely in their material, moral and spiritual interests as they battled their way to the altar.

One might well ask then why did bishops not make this problem their priority, at least those bishops who had the pastoral care of their flock, rich and poor, at heart. Bishops were honoured as seigneurs but they were prisoners of the age in many ways. Naturally their first concern, when it came to providing a seminary for the diocese, would be for those nearing ordination in order to give them a crash course, as it were, in pastoral training. The setting up of a seminary for the very poor who could contribute nothing financially was an undertaking which called for dedicated innovators cast in almost a heroic mould, men inspired both with a deep concern for the pastoral needs of the church and the special circumstances of the students as they passed through the various stages of the educational process. As there were as yet no special juniorates, these aspirants for the priesthood had to try to get the necessary classical education as best they could. When they moved into the nearest

town or city where lectures were available in preparation for the examinations for major orders, their problems began in earnest. Even if they were accepted free by the college providing the lectures, they had to find a place to live in, and some means of support. Trying to hold down some gainful occupation, attend lectures when free, and try to study in uncongenial circumstances, not merely put them at a disadvantage when it came to the competitive examinations but the whole set up was little calculated to prepare them for a life in the ministry. It was often a recipe for despair and bitterness.

A limited number of bursaries were available from some charitable sources which enabled a lucky handful of students to board at certain colleges. One of the first hostel type colleges set up specifically for poor students in Paris was that founded by Abbé Claude Bernard which he named *Trente Trois*, (Thirty Three) as he aimed at arriving at that number in honour of the years of Our Lord's life. Some Irish students were accommodated in that college which functioned right up to the Revolution. Abbé Bernard had been gifted with a large slice of this world's goods but some of the most notable communities set up in Paris to cater for the many poor students crowding into the metropolis were founded by people less well off, and as a result the fare available to the students was barely enough to keep body and soul together. One such community was known locally as The Brothers of Abstinence; of another community one of its former members said the fare was so off-putting that it was a relief to stop eating!

By far the most successful of such privately founded seminaries was that begun ca 1650 by a student for the priesthood named René Leveque from Nantes. It was a small community but when Leveque returned to Nantes after his ordination, another non-ordained cleric, Francis Chansiergues from Avignon, took over the group and made such a success of the undertaking that he advocated the adoption of his system by bishops all over France. It was to Chansiergues, as we have seen, that Claude's friends, the Ferret brothers, both Canons of the diocese of Rennes, turned for guidance when they tried to set up such a *petit séminaire*, or seminary, run on more economic lines, for non-paying poor students.³ Abbé Bellier, took over this work just as Claude was leaving home for his law studies at Nantes. This venture thrived under Bellier's guidance but it was found too much for a single individual who was also involved in preaching parish missions and in organising local youth involvement in the care of the poor and the sick; so the Eudist community helped out. By the time Claude was setting out for Paris one of Bellier's collaborators in the parish mission movement, Fr. Alloth du Doranlo, decided to compose a lengthy document in the form of an open letter to the bishops of France based on the experience of the mission team in Brittany. His message to the bishops was that the good work being done by their team of volunteers from the diocesan clergy and from the religious orders was like filling a leaking cistern for the want of a backup group of good pastors who were willing to serve in neglected areas. These could only be supplied by many such seminaries as they were conducting at Rennes. It was a crisis situation which their lordships should view as a priority. Doranlo, a former avocat who had opted for the priesthood late in life, would have been well known in the des Places circles.⁴ His proposals would certainly have been familiar to Claude from Abbé Bellier and from the Jesuits who were actively involved in the missions team. One can well imagine Claude being interested in these discussions and being totally in favour of the proposals but, having his own problems to cope with, one can appreciate that he did not feel that he was in anyway directly involved, at least until after his ordination.

Most likely Doranlo's initiative was not unconnected with the other project launched the same year, namely the introduction of the cause of Fr. Michel

Le Nobletz who had been in fact looked on as the originator of these parish missions in Brittany which had been such an influence for good in the province ever since. We have seen that the perusal of the biography of this saintly priest had a profound influence on Claude. One aspect of that story which must have deeply coloured Claude's outlook from what we know of his subsequent utterances, was what Le Nobletz had written just a hundred years earlier about the plight of the poor students for the priesthood in Paris and the type of formation they needed if they were to prove to be good pastors later.⁵ We shall have occasion to return to this subject later but one can imagine Claude reflecting, as he read that part of the book, that so little had changed in the hundred years. He may well have been moved from then on to take a more practical interest in the welfare of these students at least from the motive of charity to come to the material assistance of individual students though as yet he had no urge to get involved in their spiritual formation. The donning of the clerical habit, his membership of the Aa and his seniority in age and studies would inevitably entail that he was cast in the role also of counsellor for the less secure among the extern students at Louis le Grand.

When the school year broke up at the end of summer 1702 the boarders at Louis le Grand headed for home. The Jesuit scholastics would have left Paris for one of their houses in the country. There is no evidence that Claude returned home to Rennes. He could well have been invited to join the Jesuit students as they were transferred to a community less confined than Louis le Grand. But as he had his private room at the college he may have decided to remain on there concentrating on the visitation of hospitals and the catechising work which he had been doing under the auspices of the Sodality of Our Lady. He was also now developing an intense interior life of prayer which was transforming his relations with God and with life around him.⁶

GETTING INVOLVED

One of his early biographers, Picot de Clorivière, drawing on sources no longer available, says that one of the consequences of this second conversion of Claude was that he decided to take a vow of poverty. Claude said in his own notes that he looked forward to the time when he would have dispensed with all his material goods so as to depend entirely on alms. Then he would be able to identify with the poor. From now on he practised real poverty to such a degree that, as Thomas reminds us, his father felt he could not at all approve of his way of acting. Though Clorivière does not add substantially to what we have already recorded it is worth quoting what he has to say as an independent witness adding his slight variations:

The reading of the life of Michel Le Nobletz, a missionary priest who died in the odour of sanctity in Brittany, also served to raise him above considerations of human respect and to detach him from all things. Having consecrated himself from then on to the practice of poverty, he also proposed to separate himself from family ties, from his former friends, from the quest of honours and titles, and he aimed henceforth at being preoccupied solely with the salvation of his own soul and that of his neighbour.⁷

When Clorivière goes on to affirm that Claude was influenced in his way of life by the conversations he had with certain holy persons who lived at Louis le Grand he gives no indication as to who these holy persons may have been. There can be no doubt however that the main influence in his change of life-style came from his association with the Aa. His ministry among the poor students would

not have been undertaken without the knowledge of his fellow members and it could not have been sustained without their support. Above all it could not have been undertaken without the consent and support of the director of the Aa, Fr. Le Tellier. They were well aware of the “troubles and fatigue” he experienced in his involvement as we see from their report to the provinces. One of the main duties of the members of the Aa was to be on the watch out to evangelize the milieu in which they lived as well as coming to the aid of those in direst need in the matter of ill-health or material need. Both these areas of need existed right beside him in the classrooms and the college halls. The tattered clothes, the anxious looks and the famished faces of the poorer students who came in to join them each day were no longer to be considered the responsibility of some one else. He could not care for them all. Some would resent intrusion from one of their own age group and feel ashamed to be the objects of such charity. Claude began with a very young student who obviously was in need of protection. John Faulconnier was only sixteen and badly off for shelter and food. Claude quietly took him under his care and saw to it that he was well looked after. In return he used him on delicate errands to bring aid to others who would be embarrassed to receive it directly from Claude.⁸

The new academic year began 1st of October. Claude was now clothed in the soutane or clerical dress. This would have given him a certain moral status among his fellow students. Conscious now of an obligation to involve himself in the pastoral care of others he soon became more aware of the plight of these extern students not merely in their obvious material poverty but because they had no religious formation, no spiritual direction to guide them in the ways of prayer or encourage them in devotional practices. They lived as private individuals with no sense of belonging to any caring community. Eventually his conversations with a few of these students led him to take his first step in coming to their aid at a pastoral level. Instead of just meeting them in the college halls between classes, listening to their problems and trying to give them some guidance, he arranged, no doubt after consulting the competent college authority, to have the use of a room where they could meet at specified times. He had already built up a rapport with a few in sharing his rations with them and contributing towards their upkeep from his own personal allowance. Speaking of the tentative beginnings of this little community Fr. Besnard has this to say in his account of Grignon de Montfort’s visit to Paris looking for support for the missions he was conducting single-handed in various parts of the west country:

Claude understood that he could do nothing better than continue to aid poor students to live and enable them to pursue their studies. He did not limit himself to such temporal aid. He conceived a plan of bringing them together in a room where he would occasionally go to give them instruction and look after them as much as his regime in the college would allow him...⁹

We shall have occasion to return later in more detail to the discussions Claude had at this period with the future Saint, Grignon de Montfort. For the moment we try to piece together from the meagre records that have survived, the exact sequence of events which gradually led Claude to become deeply involved with the welfare of this group of students at a time when he was busily engaged in the study of theology, and how these students, who were his peers, gradually came to look on him as their spiritual guide as well as their provider. With the gift of hindsight we can see clearly how Providence had been preparing Claude over the years with his particular education at home and through the various educational institutions and persons which had helped shape his personality and temperament,

fitting him to undertake such a delicate and responsible task. At the time however Claude and the people he consulted must have had their anxious moments as they saw the direction and momentum of his involvement. Clorivière in his life of Saint Grignon writes as follows about Claude's early progress in this initiative:

The fire of charity which devoured him at this stage made him ardently desire to contribute in some way to the betterment of souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. What entered his mind, or more accurately what the Holy Spirit made him understand as the best means of achieving that end, was to enable poor scholars to carry on their course, students who, if they were not so assisted, would see themselves forced to bury talents which the church could use to such great advantage. This inspiration was all that was needed to move a heart as great as his; it became the guiding force of his conduct. From that moment all his savings were consecrated to that work. He even cut back for that purpose on what was most necessary for his own use and shared the portions served to him at table with one of the poor scholars who lived near the entrance to the college. That was but an earnest of what he was soon to do with a zeal, the fruits of which are clearly to be seen today.¹⁰

Life was not easy for Claude as he strove to cope with lectures, with revision of studies, participation in the oral sessions, with his hours of prayer oral and mental, while having to care for these students in between times, realising that they depended on him literally for their daily bread and increasingly for their spiritual guidance.

None of these extracts from the early biographers make any mention of the help we expect Claude might have received from the other students as he went about his very demanding undertaking. In the absence of any such statements it was not possible for later biographers to state categorically that he had received such backing though they may have felt that it was highly probable. The discovery of Claude's membership of the Aa has changed all that. Though no concrete evidence of such assistance has surfaced, a study of the rules of the Aa as found in their manual and elsewhere leaves us with no doubt that he was not left to act on his own. It was of the essence of their association that any work undertaken by one of their number and approved of at their meetings became automatically the concern of all. Be the work spiritual or temporal all were expected to row in and treat that work as their own. The assistance was not to be limited to their prayerful support and counsels: a collection was taken up at their weekly meetings to provide a fund from which they could draw as they visited folk in hospital, in prison or in their homes; but it was also provided for that a portion of their fund should be set aside to cater for possible serious emergencies.¹¹

As one scans the resumé of the good works undertaken by the members of the Aa at Paris over the previous years one looks in vain for any real practical concern for the poor students attending the college. This may well have been considered a delicate area best left to the concern of the college or diocesan authorities. We can be morally certain that the initiative in this area came from Claude; and further, we do not have to search far for the source of his inspiration. He could not have remained insensitive to this glaring lack of action when he recalled the splendid work he has seen done at his own doorstep in Rennes by Fr. Bellier and the Canons Ferrets who were closely associated with the des Places circle of friends. Once, however, Claude had mooted his project of caring for the material and spiritual needs of their fellow students he could be sure of having the active support of this confreres in the Aa.

There was a time when those who were accepted at Louis le Grand on the strength of a bursary, the *pauperes* as they were known, had to fend for themselves in the matter of food as they waited for the second sitting in the large dining room: the cost of meals was not considered to be covered by the meagre bursaries. There is no hint that these *pauperes* had to live on very short rations. There was normally sufficient left over after the room was cleared of staff and paying students.¹² Now as Claude's dependents had increased in numbers he could no longer feed them from his personal ration, so he had to have an understanding with the principal or bursar that he could collect from the kitchen what was left over to share it among his charges. The bursar's name is known to us: Fr. Megret, a man who was criticised by the enemies of Louis le Grand for his lack of academic talents but no one could criticise him for his managerial qualifications; during the eighteen years he was in charge, the running of the huge complex was seen to be in safe hands. Among his main responsibilities was that of providing meals for 600 each day between students and staff. The fare was the same for all and from extant records one can reconstruct the amount of supplies passing through the kitchen on a normal day.¹³ As the amount seems to have varied from time to time it could happen that those depending on the left overs had their lean days. When as yet the numbers were few, Claude had little problem in securing all they needed, especially as he had struck up a good relationship with the kitchen staff. Fr. Megret, who appreciated the good work he was doing, assured him of his support. Besnard recounts the bare facts as follows:

Claude confided his project to his confessor and obtained his approval for it. The superior of the college did something more: he promised to help by giving him a portion of what was left over after the meals of the boarders thereby contributing to the maintenance of these poor students...¹⁴

One can but admire the Jesuit fathers who not merely provided these students with their academic fare free of charge as they allowed them free access to their lecture halls, but now were ready to provide them with their daily bread. It was a sign of their growing confidence in Claude and their appreciation of his practical abilities as well as his academic and spiritual qualities, that they gave full backing to his initiative. One must remember that in the climate of opposition in which they had to live in this network of colleges connected with the University, they could not run the risk of being associated with a failed project. Above all, because of their strained relations with Cardinal des Noailles and some of his close advisers, they did not want to be seen to be conducting what be considered a fully fledged seminary in competition with the five such seminaries for the diocesan clergy already approved of for Paris. They may well have been very happy to have such a man as Claude take over the running of this laudable enterprise. Not a member of the society, yet he was totally committed to its interests, and though they did not see it as their own responsibility to take charge of such an enterprise, they were ready to lend their support in whatever way they could short of being involved in the management. When the Irish College nearby, the Lombard College, badly needed funds from charity some years earlier it was to the great Jesuit orator, Fr. Bourdaloue, that they turned to preach the charity sermon before a congregation of fashionable and charitable Parisian ladies. The sentiments expressed by Bourdaloue in that remarkable sermon, preached at a time when Claude probably had him as his model because of his oratorical prowess (1696), would have surprised Claude then but would now be grist for his mill because in it he outlined the call by the Council of Trent for the generous support of poor students wanting to be priests. Further,

Bourdaloue outlined the ideals which should inspire the formation of such future priests facing a demanding mission in a society divided into rich and very poor.¹⁵

The Jesuits were not the only people faced with the challenge of getting involved in the sponsoring of such a seminary for the non-paying students in Paris run in conjunction with their own college. The very successful seminary of Saint Sulpice had a conscience crisis about such involvement by members of its own staff who felt a duty to set up such a seminary for these poor students. It was eventually ruled by the governing body that the seminary was not to get directly involved as that would necessitate organising fund-raising ventures, etc. This was considered foreign to the spirit of disinterestness in financial ventures which was a vital element of the Saint Sulpice ethos. The same line of argument was taken by the other great seminary in that region of Paris, St Nicholas du Chardonnet. Both seminaries did however conduct a department where a more economic rate was charged for diminished services.¹⁶

Claude's initiative, once it became organised, naturally awakened the interest and sympathy of those who realised the need for such a work. Clorivière, writing later, referred to this period as follows:

Other people, touched by such a fine example, interested themselves in this work whose good results they could so readily see. Among others the principal of the college promised to give these young men a portion of what was superfluous at the tables of the boarders.

This saintly ecclesiastic knew how to profit from such an offer which put it within his reach to come to the aid of an even greater number of scholars and to trample under foot all considerations of honour and worldly glory: he did not flinch at being seen by the most distinguished people in the college as he took personal charge of these left-overs which he had just collected himself from the kitchen...¹⁷

Knowing the delicacy of his situation as a beggar Claude made sure that he called personally to collect the rations from those who knew him rather than entrust this task to a student. This tact and attention to detail was to be his distinguishing trait as he organised his community in the years ahead.

During the first months of the academic year 1702-03, Claude was becoming progressively more involved with his protégés. All his spare time, his spare pocket money, and even what he once thought he could not afford to spare, was going to their support and supervision. The numbers involved were only four or five at the start but others asked to join the group at the regular meetings in the room designated for their use. Claude was by then paying for the lodgings of a number of these who had found accommodation in the vicinity. One student whose meals he supplied is reported by Clorivière as residing at the entrance to the college. It is not clear whether he is referring to a location within the college complex or is this a reference to the first student placed by Claude in the buildings which were soon to become the home of his "seminary".

RUE DES CORDIERS

Across the street, rue Saint Jacques, from the main college entrance there was a block of houses flanked on the left by rue des Cordiers and on the right by rue des Poirées which after some 50 yards took a sharp turn to the left to join rue des Cordiers. This block of buildings formed a buffer between the property of the Sorbonne on the right and of the famous Dominican priory known as the Jacobins on the left. This Dominican priory, sacred to the memories of St Albert

the Great and his student St Thomas Aquinas, was named the Jacobins because of its proximity to the historic rue Saint Jacques, but its title to fame today is that the most famous of the clubs of the Revolution made it their headquarters after the owners had been forcibly dispossessed. The two large houses off rue des Cordiers had close relations over the years with Louis le Grand as hostels for the senior students who were not accommodated within the college itself. Both these houses, La Rose-Blanche (the White Rose) nearest the college, and Le Gros Chapelet forming the corner between rue des Cordiers and the extension of rue des Poirées, were owned by the Pechenard family. The head of this family was surgeon to the Queen Mother. Both houses were obviously planned to provide the maximum accommodation as hostels and were leased to a hotelier who looked after the allocation of the rooms not needed for their own clients. Students attending Louis le Grand were accepted on recommendation from the college authorities who kept check on discipline etc. Among the students who had been located in the Rose Blanche in the past were St Francis de Sales (1582) and the future founders of the *Société des Missions Etrangères* (The Society of the Foreign Missions). It was there also that the *Assemblée des Amis*, then known as *Société des Bons amis*, had come into action in Paris for the first time under the guidance of Fr. Jean Bagot, SJ, with the future founders of the Society of the Foreign Missions being its first members. Gros Chapelet was now to be the cradle of a new society destined one day to play a leading role in the work of the foreign missions; and once again it could be said that that society owed its conception to the Aa of which Claude, its founder, was an active member.¹⁸

Once Claude had reached an understanding with the management of Gros Chapelet, no doubt on the recommendation of the Jesuit bursar, Fr. Megret, being advised by Fr. Le Tellier, that he could gradually locate his protégés there as space became available, it was seen to be an ideal solution for him. Being so near the college and under strict supervision, Claude could be more closely associated with them and be in a better position to look after their needs. Apart from the general rules binding on all the students connected with the college he began to draw up some more definite guidelines and a timetable based on the regulation he had mapped out for himself. Above all he had a chance at last to initiate them into some simple form of devotional exercises as a community.

One of the intentions mentioned by Claude twice in his own personal regulation was that he might know the will of God for himself. This covered all aspects of his daily life but in particular he must have been thinking of his personal vocation. He was of course already preparing for the priesthood but as yet he had not approached any bishop or decided what type of pastoral work he hoped to undertake once ordained. He had yet to look for his letters of freedom from his home diocese in order to be ordained in Paris and he seems to have no intention of returning to live in Rennes. He had some general idea of working on the foreign missions, no doubt inspired by the letters and narratives of the Jesuit missionaries. Writing about this period sometime later he said:

Of temporal possessions I had intended to keep only my health alone, so that I could sacrifice it to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after having set the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed the last drop of my blood for him whose blessings were always before my eyes.¹⁹

Though normally the word missions at this period could refer to the preaching of parish missions throughout France, in this context it is obvious that Claude was

referring to missions to the infidels. This was a very topical theme just then at Louis le Grand in 1702 as the *Scriptores* had begun to publish the accounts sent home by Jesuits working on the missions. The ideal of martyrdom was inspired by the vivid accounts of the sufferings and death of the Jesuit martyrs in Japan and more recently in North America. John de Brébeuf and his companions, who had suffered so grievously at the hands of the Huron Indians, may have been known to the older members of the Jesuit communities in Paris. Claude's plans and hopes for the future at this time were very generalised but bore the authentic stamp of generosity. The Lord was soon to reveal his will to him, some thing that required generosity of a high order and where he was indeed to endeavour to set other hearts on fire with the love of God and endure a veritable martyrdom in so doing, but far removed from the heroic mould he had dreamt of. A number of events were about to happen which would help concentrate his mind and force him to commit himself to this very special ministry.

SPRING 1703

The first of these events happened sometime before Christmas 1702. He came to the conclusion that he must quit the cherished seclusion of his private room in the college where he had built up his own new life with his regular undisturbed routine of prayer, study and visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and where he was reassuringly summoned to meals and lectures by the sound of a bell. He realised he must move out into the boarding house across the street where he had secured lodgings for his students in order that they be near one another. At first perhaps he thought that they could manage on their own, as most likely they could, but gradually he came to the conclusion that his place was with them. We can be sure that the final step was taken in the interest of the students, and we can also be certain that the students were more than happy to have their new-found guide and father demonstrate his solidarity with them by becoming one of themselves. Claude as a private individual was entirely free to move out of Louis le Grand. The college regent had no power to prevent him. He was in fact ready to grant him whatever help he needed for the successful conduct of his work. But Claude knew only too well that he must not trust the guidance of his own heart. If he wanted to be sure that what he was doing was what God wanted, he must consult his confessor laying all his motives bare as he had been specially counselled by the rules of the *Aa*. No doubt his decision was discussed at their regular meetings also. All were agreed as to the propriety of his decision. So he took his few belongings and putting his trust in the Lord, walked out, in a sense, into the dark. Later, when going through a crisis, due to what we call burn out and also while experiencing what masters in the spiritual life describe as passing through a necessary phase of purification, he had his doubts as to whether his motives in getting so closely involved with this work were as unselfish as he professed. He wrote then:

It is true that I did not undertake the work without the permission of my director. But here again my conscience reproaches me, as it has frequently done before. How did I present the work to him? What tricks did I not use? At first I said it was only a matter of feeding four or five scholars quietly, without any fuss whatsoever. Perhaps at the time I did not reveal the full extent of my ambition and vanity.²⁰

During that spiritual crisis, which is not an uncommon occurrence in the lives of the saints totally committed to the work of God, his director was happily able to convince Claude to continue with his good work with a clear conscience. If only

Claude had forgotten for a moment the success by then achieved and recalled the opening months in spring 1703 and what he had to endure, he would have been able to laugh at the suggestion that he was acting out of ambition and desire for glory. He had in fact to face the stings of poverty and face the humiliations of being so closely associated with the *pauperes* of the Latin Quarter where genteel status and snobbery were rife. At Louis le Grand the senior students had each his own sword to don as a sign of his genteel status as he left the college and even the juniors dangled a special cane from their belts to let it be known that they belonged to a family claiming nobility.²¹ Claude now found that he had often to face the sneers of the snobs as well as the pangs of hunger as he foraged for his charges and helped carry the left-overs across the public street to their chosen quarters in the Gros Chapelet. He had not even allowed himself the luxury of a bed to sleep in at that time.

By 20 March 1701 Claude was already clearly known to be committed to his new and arduous undertaking which was well enough organised that it could be designated as a seminary in the secret report sent by the *Assemblée des Amis* to Toulouse. This brief report, already quoted from, is in fact the earliest account we have of Claude's "seminary" albeit as yet in its infancy. So it is fitting that we quote from it again in this context:

Another (confrère) has left a benefice of 4,000 pounds and a position of councillor in parliament that his parents wanted to give him in order instead to become director of a seminary, where he will experience only troubles and fatigue. The same person sleeps daily only three hours on a chair, and spends the rest of his time in prayer. The same, for reasons of mortification, never eats but one kind of meat and drinks only water...²²

This brief account written by the student secretary of the Aa would have had to pass through the hands of the director, Fr. Le Tellier, before being cleared for dispatch to other centres throughout France. One can be sure that it was he rather than the student secretary who used the word seminary to describe Claude's work and this indicates the perception of his work by the Jesuits already at this early stage.

That the "troubles and fatigue" involved in trying to conduct his seminary put great strain on Claude's mental, physical and financial resources we can appreciate. What pulls us up with a jolt is the revelation here and elsewhere of the extent of his self-imposed mortifications. This might well raise questions in some minds about his mental balance and suitability for the post of director of the young men he was trying to help. To arrive at a more complete assessment of his state of mind at this period it will help if we quote some other statements outlining his general attitude at this time. Fr. Thomas, speaking in his customary generalised style about Claude's charity and spirit of self denial, has this to say:

But since he had to use most of the money given him by his father for his own board and lodging, he took, as we have seen, the best of what the college furnished for his own sustenance and sent it to the sick or the reticent poor, thus treating himself less well than the least of them. Before his conversion, Claude used feel that the allowance accorded by his father was insufficient for his needs. After his conversion, he found it ample and had something left over to be devoted to the needs of many others. This shows how charity coupled with mortification makes one ingeniously see in what is necessary for himself

a sort of superfluity which ought to be bestowed on the poor. He desired to be entirely destitute and live on nothing but alms.²³

For a more realistic style of narrative we turn again to Jean Faulconnier, the first student to experience his charity and witness his style of life at the time:

I knew that when he was a boarder with the Jesuits, whether he went in search of his food or whether his rations were brought to his room, I am not sure, but he used give it to those people who were in extreme need and content himself with what was left over after the meals of the Jesuits. In particular, I remember the haricot beans which at times were so long discarded that they were covered in green mould to a depth of two fingers.²⁴

Today we readily approve of his personal sacrifices in the interests of those in need whether these be the sick visited and cared for in hospital or his stinting of himself and his foraging on behalf of the starving students, but we are more than somewhat turned off by the recital of Claude's self abnegation and positive mortification at this period in the matter of curtailment of sleep, sleeping on a chair, his abstinence in the matter of food and drink, and most of all by the detail of swallowing those moulding beans even if we allow for some exaggeration in the description. It is hard to imagine that this is the same man who so recently wrote in his retreat notes that he feared his capacity for sacrifice because of his penchant for soft living. We are made to feel that we are dealing with a different age, a spiritual climate far removed from ours, and above all a standard of diet and hygiene at variance with the norms of our affluent society. One wonders if we are dealing with something peculiar to the Gallic temperament and a brand of French spirituality which did not end with the age of Claude Poullart des Places. We recall what Fr. Libermann said as late as the mid-nineteenth century, namely that he had been given to understand that the Irish lacked that generosity which was necessary to survive in the service of the Third World, that they were prone to hankering after *la vie comfortable*. It is reassuring, however, to learn that Claude himself, when looking back on this period of his life, was genuinely amazed at the facility with which he could face sacrifices and undergo penance which he was no longer able to take in his stride. He was made realise that at this time he had been in the first flush of his intense love affair with the Lord, whom he had but recently discovered, and that he had felt driven to give expression to that love in acts of extreme sacrifice in the service of those most in need and even in the mortifications inflicted on himself. Indeed so much was he bent on punishing his sinful self that he had to be restrained by his director whom he consulted in all such matters. That this emotional "high", or period of affective prayer, to give it its technical name, lasted only for a period of eighteen months was to be a source of shock to Claude himself, but for the masters of spiritual direction this was known to be the norm.²⁵ As it happened it was in great measure due to this experience of beginner's fervour that Claude was able to undertake with relative ease the work he would in other circumstances have found a rather intolerable burden. That reaction might set in later. In fact it did. But that is for a later chapter.

GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

Another event which happened at this stage helped decisively to clarify Claude's understanding of what he felt God was calling him to: this was the series of conversations he had with Grignon de Montfort who was staying for some months in Paris in an effort to recruit helpers. We last met Grignon in 1693

as he left Rennes for Paris to study for the priesthood. Claude was then but in his fifteenth year; yet we are told he had developed a close relationship with Grignion due perhaps to a family association in the legal world and to the fact that Grignion's uncle was a pastor in the local church, but above all because of their mutual devotion to Our Lady. There is no definite record of their having met face to face in the intervening years. Claude would have been kept informed of Grignion's progress through the occasional letters received by the uncle Fr. A.R. des Visuelles. Grignion seems not to have returned to Rennes but he is on record as having returned once to his home town of Montfort and some of his former friends at St Thomas' College went out the fifteen mile journey to confer with him, as we gather from his friend and biographer, M. Blain. Grignion's advice to those contemplating going on for the priesthood was couched in the Lord's message to Abraham: "Go out from your own kindred to the land that I will show you".²⁶ Grignion certainly followed that advice himself. He was now about to renounce his family name, Bachellier, and adopt merely the name of his home town – Montfort. His drastic advice, which was followed by Claude later, was not as exceptional as might appear at first sight. In fact it was quite topical then. One of the rules made by the bishop of Rennes for the poor scholars seeking admission to the special seminary founded by the Ferret brothers with assistance from Abbé de Saint-Aubin from Paris, was that they were not to go back to their home areas, as was so commonly done, but that they were to be ready to go to the parishes and posts determined by the bishop; otherwise they would incur suspension.²⁷ This was to counteract the abuse of aiming for a cozy benefice near home in order to be able to boost the family's income, neglecting the poorer regions and more demanding ministries.

Ordained in 1700 de Montfort wanted to set off for mission work in Canada but the directors at Saint Sulpice advised him instead to join the community of St. Clement at Nantes founded by Fr. Leveque for the conducting of parish missions. Fr. Leveque, now advanced in years, had been then revisiting Paris where many years ago he had started a seminary for poor students trying to study for the priesthood.²⁸ It is not known if Claude had left Nantes by the time of Grignion's arrival there October 1700; and in the absence of positive evidence we cannot say for certain that they met when Grignion came to Paris in late summer 1702 though he remained on for about two months. The purpose of Grignion's visit then was to consult his former directors at Saint-Sulpice about the possibility of founding a special society of priests dedicated to Our Lady who would be committed to preaching such missions in parishes as he was trying to do on his own. He got a very cool reception and spent much of his time in miserable conditions beside the Jesuit novitiate.²⁹ In the closely knit centre of the clerical world in that quarter at the time it is unlikely that Claude would not have learned of his presence and renewed his contact with him.

Grignion was back in Paris once more in spring 1703 and it was he who made it his business to contact Claude. Again his purpose in revisiting the capital was to investigate the possibilities of securing co-workers who would form the nucleus of the society he had envisaged. He well might have come to the conclusion that Claude was the answer to his prayers. They resumed their former friendship and discovered that their ideas and their plans for helping in the spread of the kingdom of God had very much in common. Claude's particular work and the ideals which inspired its direction were exactly what Grignion would have wished. In the series of conversations they held they tried to sort out where and how they could cooperate. The outcome was that Claude was now clear in his mind about his own contribution. He had felt during the retreat aiming at a choice in his state

of life that God was calling him for a particular function in his church; at the time he did not have any clear intuition of what that might be and in fact he was trying not to listen. Now he had no doubts, and he had no hesitations. We are left some helpful details on this fruitful encounter between Claude and Grignon by Frs Charles Besnard and Picot de Clorivière. First Besnard.

Besnard had been a student in the seminary founded by Claude. He had not known Claude personally but he had lived with those who had been students under him, notably Fr. Louis Bouic, his second successor, Fr. Thomas his biographer and Fr. Peter Caris who was seen to embody his spirituality. Besnard had joined the society founded by Grignon and was destined to be his successor as superior general. It was natural that when he set out to write the life of Grignon he would go to special trouble to give the facts not merely about the close liaison between the seminary and the society founded by Grignon, but in particular to detail the relations between the respective founders. As his evidence is of paramount importance we transcribe in full what he was to say about the encounter in Paris in spring 1703.

At the same time, Louis de Montfort was considering another plan worthy of such a great-hearted man. He wanted to find priests animated with a like spirit and join them to himself in order to constitute a congregation of apostolic men. No thought was sweeter to him than that of envisioning himself with them, serving God and sanctifying himself by working for the salvation of souls in the missions. Although he did not yet know the time, place, or way in which it was to be brought about, it appeared to him that this was all that God asked of him.

Claude was the man to whom he looked for the execution of his plans. He went to visit him, proposed the matter, and invited him to join in the foundation of this good work. Claude replied in all frankness:

I do not feel attracted to the missions, but I am too well aware of the good they can do not to cooperate as much as I can and not to be inseparably attached to them together with you. You know that for some time I have been distributing everything at my disposal to help poor students continue their studies. I know several who offered excellent possibilities but for the lack of help were unable to exploit them.

Consequently, they were forced to bury talents that would have been very useful to the Church if they were developed. That is the goal at which I would like to aim by gathering them together in a house. It seems to me that this is what God wants of me. I have been confirmed in this thought by enlightened persons who have given me reason to hope that they will help me by providing sustenance for these students. If God gives me the grace to succeed, you may count on missionaries. I will train them for you and you will put them to work. In this way you will be satisfied and so will I.

That was the result of the conversation and the beginning of that union and relationship which has always existed between the mission of Louis de Montfort and the Community of Father des Places. Once the decision was taken, both parties concerned thought only about its execution and how each would fulfil the role assigned to him. Claude began by renting a room in the *rue des Cordiers*, near the college, and gathered there the poor students whom he had already been helping before and whose good dispositions were known to him.

The progress made in every line of endeavour was too remarkable not to attract other excellent candidates to him. Consequently, he decided to rent a house for them in which they would be less cramped for space.³⁰

Fr. Clorivière, though obviously using the same sources as Besnard, has some significant additions that make it worth while giving his narrative here also:

Claude had begun to occupy himself with these works of charity when de Montfort, who had some time previously entered on the career of the missions, came to Paris and made a rather lengthy stay there.

This was in 1701 & 1702, as we have seen (more correctly 1702 & 1703) and consequently M. des Places, to judge from his age, was not yet ordained priest. These two men, full of the love of God and their neighbour and so detached from themselves and from all created things, soon renewed a friendship the first links of which had been forged by religion in past years. They both encouraged one another to serve God in the most perfect manner. The missionary, who had already from this period contemplated the project of which we have already spoken – namely the founding a society of apostolic men and who found in his friend all the qualities which he could have wished for, besought him more than once to join with him. But one day, when he pressed him more earnestly, M. des Places who had views and insights which differed from his, responded with his customary candour and modesty that he did not feel any attraction to the work of the missions, but added that he realised only too well the good which could be done there not to continue with all his power to attach himself inviolably to him, that what he had been doing for some time had the approval of many enlightened persons, and that the Lord appeared to be showering his blessings abundantly on these little beginnings. Furthermore, he added, this good work had the closest links with his own, that among the students he was helping to pursue their studies there were those in whom he believed he had discovered dispositions which would make them one day suitable for work in the mission, that he would from then on help to prepare such subjects and when the time came it would be for him to launch them on this work.

After this interview M. de Montfort did not insist further with his original proposition and doubtless he could now see in the long term the development of the designs of God for himself and for his friend. As for M. des Places, he now applied himself with more ardour than ever to his own good work...³¹

These texts help us to get closer to Claude's preoccupations at this period as he tried gradually to cope with the logistics of setting up his little community, attending to the financial requirements, making sure there was something to eat, sorting out the regulation and the various chores to be done, while all the time getting to know the temperament and potentialities of each student. What Grignon's visit must have done for him was to make him think with more purpose and assurance about the formation he had to try to afford these future priests. He had been aware of the problems and the requirements of life in areas that had been neglected by the clergy in the city and in rural areas; the urgency of the problem and the importance of the type of formation required for future pastors had now been brought home more forcibly to him. He knew that it was important to make it crystal clear to those young men that they were not in the priesthood for what they could get out of it, as so many others obviously were, but for what they could do for God's neglected flock. He must concentrate on providing a pastoral formation



Rue des Cordiers (Cujas)
with hostel to right



May procession at St. Etienne des Grés



N.D. de Bonne Délivrance

which would foster in them a spirit of total availability in the spread of the Gospel, strengthened by habits of personal prayer and a love of the liturgical and devotional life of the Church; the academic training he could leave in the safe hands of the Jesuit professors and those in charge of the repetition classes.

OUR LADY OF RESCUE

We know nothing of the devotional life of this little community in the early stages. What prayers they said in common had to be recited in one of the larger rooms which acted as dormitories for several students. They would have attended Mass and other devotions in one of the five chapels in the college complex. But there was another church in the vicinity, which was open to the public, and they availed of it. Right across rue Saint Jacques from where rue des Cordiers opened on to it, and separated by a narrow street from the Jesuit college, was the church of Saint-Etienne des Grès, one of the oldest and most popular religious centres in the capital. For centuries it had been a place of pilgrimage because it housed the famous statue of the Black Virgin formerly known as Notre-Dame des Ames en Peines but in more recent times known as Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance, Our Lady of Rescue. During the Middle Ages this shrine was frequented by the great saints: Dominic, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas etc. It had been a recognised stopping point for pilgrims en route to Compostella in Spain and the Tomb of St Martin. In more recent centuries it had frequent visits from St Vincent de Paul as he poured out his requests before Our Lady of Rescue for the captives, the prisoners, the poor etc. whose plight he tried to alleviate. Of more immediate interest for students of Louis le Grand was the knowledge that St Francis de Sales, who attended the college as a student and lodged in the building where they now lived, had come daily to pray to Our Lady to be delivered from his crisis of faith as he struggled with the mystery of predestination which came up for much discussion in their theology classes. They probably also learned that founders of seminaries including Père Claude Bernard, founder of Trente Trois College for poor students and M. Olier, founder of Saint Sulpice, had come there to ask Our Lady's protection for their undertakings.

Certain popular devotions had grown up in connection with the shrine over the years which received the approval of kings and popes. The principal event connected with the shrine which affected the life of Paris was the establishment of the confrérie whose membership reached 12,000 and the donations collected were used by the members in rescuing prisoners for debts, supporting the families of fathers committed to prison and assisting the sick. Twice each year they organised a huge and colourful procession in honour of Our Lady on the first day of May and the first day of August. These events were prepared for weeks in advance and followed a time-honoured and spectacular ritual. The church bells pealed out, all traffic came to a stop as thousands flocked to join in the procession. The special devotions started with the singing of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* before the high altar. Then the revered statue of Our Lady was carried in triumph through the streets, followed by the statues and symbols of other famous saints from the general calendar as well as saints with local associations.³² This magnificent ceremonial would have been the first public religious event witnessed, and no doubt participated in, by the newly established community which would have considered itself specially involved as they lived in the very shadow of this church. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the students were even coopted to act as carriers of some of the religious emblems. What is clear is that this church was soon after chosen by the community as the site for their own very special

ceremony where they were to make their formal dedication of themselves to the Holy Spirit under the protection of Our Lady Immaculate. The shrine of Our Lady in this church of Saint-Etienne des Gres took on such a family significance for the students that they were to maintain over the years their custom of making two visits there each day as they attended class at Louis le Grand.³³

OFFICIAL DEDICATION

Little is known about the original dedication ceremony. No contemporary document has survived the upheavals of the two revolutions which not merely dispersed the community but dispossessed them of their home and belongings. Among the documents confiscated during the Revolution and still preserved in the National Archives is the official Register of Associates drawn up as required by law on 4 March 1734 by the then directors. In the course of their lengthy formal statement of facts and legally binding procedures we find this statement:

...And the said Community and Seminary have recognised from a long standing register that Mr Claude Francis Poullart des Places, being at the time only an aspirant to the clerical state, began the foundation of the said Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin, on the Feast of Pentecost in the year seventeen hundred and three.³⁴

The original register referred to in 1734 has unfortunately been lost. The earliest printed document which refers to the foundation is an entry in *Gallia Christiana*, vol VII, published as late as 1744, but it is of special significance in that quoting from sources no longer available it seems to imply that the request for this formal dedication came from the students themselves. The actual words used are: "when the number of students had reached almost a dozen they asked to be consecrated to the clerical life".³⁵

One can well understand that the students might have felt that it was in their own interests that such a commitment be made, and one can guess that Claude looked on their request as being the voice of God for him. Such a dedication would be a decisive step for him personally. Though he was already in fact deeply involved with the students and committed to their welfare and formation, he was yet a free man, a private individual doing a work of charity. From now on he was committing himself publicly before the students and in the presence of God and his Mother. Henceforth this was to be his life. And it was to be his death.

That the official dedication was postponed till Pentecost Sunday, 27 May that year, could have been no mere chance. By that time Claude had been some six months in residence in the hostel with the students. They may have called for the dedication ceremony and may well have chosen the location, as they had by then built up a special relationship with that shrine on their way to and from lectures, but there can be little doubt that the particular date of the ceremony must have been chosen by Claude. Pentecost was a feast always celebrated with great solemnity at Louis le Grand, the ceremonies beginning on Saturday evening when the whole school assembled for the vigil liturgy.³⁶ But Claude had chosen that feast because he had for his own reasons decided to dedicate his community in a particular way to the Holy Spirit under the Patronage of Mary Immaculate, Spouse of the Spirit, as he referred to her in the rule he composed for the community. (No.30)

Père Le Floch in his substantial study of Claude and his seminary, in the absence of any further extant documentation, tries to recreate the scene, composing for Claude a sermon based on the words of Isaiah quoted by Our Lord in his first

sermon in his native Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me. He sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken..."³⁷ We will probably be nearer the facts about that simple but historic ceremony if we turn our attention for a moment to the details about certain ceremonies held by the Aa. The two special events in the Aa calendar each year were their renewal ceremonies (*renovation*) where they restated their ideals and pledged their commitment to them in the form of prayer.³⁸ These renewals were held on the feast of St. John the Evangelist, 27 December, and Pentecost Sunday.

A paragraph in the Aa manual which was read in public on these occasions would have been very familiar to all members as it dealt with the convening of the first such meeting at Louis le Grand. The short paragraph reads as follows:

As there were six with a common purpose it was decided to choose the day of Pentecost, 4 June 1645, when they would be all together at the sodality meeting place. At three in the afternoon each one recited on his own the (dedication) prayers and then they all said the other prayers as prescribed by the rules for the reception of those being proposed for membership.

Claude would have been very conscious of that originating ceremony held on Pentecost 1645 as well as his own reception ceremony, and would have looked on them as the model for their proposed dedication as a community of students. He would have attended the Aa renewal meeting in one of the chapels at Louis le Grand on Pentecost Sunday and then sometime later that evening would have gathered his little flock together in the nearby church of Saint Etienne des Grès in front of the shrine of Our Lady of Rescue (N.D. de Bonne Délivrance). The students would have been prepared for the occasion by the very same novena which Claude as well as the other members of the Aa would have been following from their manual. The meditations specified for each day of the novena were based on the ten separate verses of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, the Sequence that is used in the Mass for Pentecost. Their commitment then would be to the Holy Spirit in the context of his descent on the disciples and Our Lady in the upper room and what would be more fitting than that they should offer themselves to the Holy Spirit through the intermediary of His Spouse. All this was spelt out in the Aa manual which had been inspired by the Lallemand school of spirituality. The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady would be looked on as the first great step in the preparation for the full outpouring of the Spirit. A few brief quotations from the manual may help put us in touch with the thoughts which were uppermost in that little group as they gathered around the Black Madonna of Paris:

After Jesus ascended to heaven, his disciples, who had witnessed his triumphs, retired to Jerusalem and there assembled with Mary the Mother of Jesus; they prayed and begged the Saviour to send that Spirit which he had promised to the world... Mary, our common mother, who is the head of this glorious company, will receive us there too to pray with them and dispose us to receive the Holy Spirit...

The Holy Spirit, looking on her as his Spouse, communicates to her all the intensity of charity...

We must preserve our hearts in inviolable purity for the Spirit of God and for his Spouse...³⁹

Finally, apart from the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which they had sung so recently in that church for the May procession, and the *Sancta Maria* Prayer from the sodality

handbook, we can be sure that Claude included his favoured short prayer to Our Lady: *Per Sanctam Virginitatem et Immaculatam Conceptionem Tuam, purissima Virgo, emunda cor et carnem meam.* (Through your holy virginity and your Immaculate Conception, O most pure Virgin, cleanse my heart and my flesh.)

It has been suggested that Grignion de Montfort had been present at this ceremony of dedication. As there is no documentary proof, circumstantial evidence has been brought forward. Grignion was in Paris at the time and had been in close contact with Claude. He had expressed great hopes for their future cooperation in the work of supplying well-trained priests for his parish missions. The twin dedication to the Holy Spirit and to Mary Immaculate was very much the essence of his spiritual outlook and we know that he wrote to a close friend asking for continuous prayer till Pentecost for a special intention.⁴⁰ In later years he referred to the Holy Spirit seminary as "our house in Paris" and he was to visit the seminary on the occasion of his visits to Paris in later years.⁴¹ He was even to sign himself officially as a missionary priest of the Company of the Holy Spirit. Hence, that he should have been present at the shrine of Notre Dame de bonne Délivrance on Pentecost Sunday 1703 for the official dedication, is in line with what we know. The plain fact, however, is that we do not know.

There are good reasons which would account for the absence of any reference to the presence of outsiders at this little ceremony, nor even any written evidence to its having taken place at all. If there was one thing Claude did not want was the issuing of any official statement or the publicising of an event which could be cited as legal evidence of his having launched a new religious community. As a lawyer he could be relied on to be very conscious of the existence of the draconian regulations of the edict issued by Louis XIV in 1666, forbidding the founding of any college, monastery, religious society, or community within the realm without have first secured the Royal consent in the form of letters patent. Not only was the list of proscribed associations exhaustive but the penalties were also drastic and applied to communities already functioning for years.⁴² Claude would have known of examples of societies that had been dissolved with no right of appeal and their property having been confiscated. One such example was the community of Dominican nuns from Rennes who had set up house in Nantes without having first secured due legal authorisation; they were disbanded and their premises handed over to the Irish College. So it was not to be expected that Claude was going to risk coming into conflict with that severe edict of 1666.

The one exception made by the edict was in favour of seminaries: they were declared to be the responsibility of the local bishop and thus did not require the royal consent. But again, though others might refer to Claude's work in secret reports as being a seminary, in fact, Claude was never to lay claim to that title for very good reasons which we will have to deal with later. So the lack of documentation regarding the founding ceremony in 1703 may not have been an oversight but the result of a deliberate policy on the part of Claude. And this hunch we shall see confirmed later as we study the rule he drafted for the direction of his "seminary".

The absence of outsiders at the dedication ceremony and the eschewing of official documentation in no way diminished the significance of the occasion for those taking part, nor did it weaken their convictions. They knew well where they stood and where they were going. They were a special community and were proud of it. Above all they prized their double dedication to the Holy Spirit and to the Immaculate Conception. The full significance of this dedication would in time be spelt out for them by Claude.

Twenty three years later (1726), Claude's students by then the directors of the

Seminary, felt the time was ripe to apply for legal recognition of the establishment. The Royal letters patent, quoting from their petition, opens with these words:

We have been informed that the late Claude Francis Poullart des Places, a priest from the diocese of Rennes, inspired by a special movement from God when he was then thirty years, founded in 1703 in our good city of Paris an establishment dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin Conceived without Sin, and that the object of that establishment was to aid and help poor students in their studies and train them in virtue for the useful service of the church.⁴³

That the students kept up the custom of making a visit twice daily to the shrine of Our Lady at Saint-Etienne des Grès bears testimony to the living tradition about their origins as a community. And as we close this chapter on the founding of the seminary and community of the Holy Spirit it will be of interest to refer briefly to the subsequent fate of that church and its revered Black Madonna. The church, which was confiscated during the Revolution, was subsequently demolished. Today the site is occupied by the School of Law attached to the Sorbonne. The statue of Our Lady was put up for public auction with other confiscated ecclesiastical goods. The official records tell us that the sale took place in *une des salles du Saint Esprit ou sont les bureaux de liquidation* and that it was bought for 201 livres by the Countess de Carignan de Saint Maurice. After being venerated at several secret locations it was eventually installed in the chapel of the Sisters of St. Thomas de Vileneuve at Neuilly, Paris. To remove all doubt about the authenticity of the statue as being the historic Black Madonna, the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Quélon, set up a public enquiry. The first witness to give evidence of identification, 30 June 1830, was Claude's successor as head of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, Fr. James Bertout, then aged seventy seven.⁴⁴ As a student in the Seminary, he would have been very familiar with this image of Our Lady having gone regularly as had been the custom, to pray at the famed shrine of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance in Saint-Etienne des Grès.



Fr. Michael Le Tellier

Progress and Crisis

1703-4

Le Gros Chapelet – the house which acted as the cradle of Claude's society, no longer exists. The area was acquired by the Sorbonne in the early nineteenth century to construct its new science block. But thanks to contemporary documents – architectural drawings, artists' impressions and legal contracts, it is possible to reconstruct a fairly complete picture of the buildings and layout of the area. From Turgot's simulated aerial views of Paris executed ca 1730 we can clearly see the square block of buildings demarcated by the rue Saint Jacques to the east as it runs past Louis le Grand, and by rue des Poirées on the north as it links up with rue des Cordiers on the south. The Gros Chapelet occupied the angle formed by the two latter mentioned streets. Surrounded by colleges, all this quarter was an obvious site for the building of hostels and hotels. Famous writers and philosophers are on record as having resided for periods in the area, among them Pascal who is reported as having worked on his famous *Provinciales* (Provincial Letters) – so devastatingly critical of the Jesuits in the Jansenist controversy (1656-7). The German philosopher, Leibnitz, J.J. Rousseau, Condillac and others lived and worked there at different periods. But it was mostly students who availed of the accommodation in the Gros Chapelet and its adjoining neighbour La Rose Blanche. Some of these students were able to rent a suite for themselves and even had the use of their own private carriage; others clubbed together to share one of the larger rooms with nothing but their bed and box of belongings. These two houses had for a considerable period been looked on as the preserve of students attending the Jesuit college and they were accepted only on being recommended by the college authorities.¹

The plans of the Gros Chapelet show that it had one unusual feature: it boasted of two *caves* or cellars, one directly over the other. It is of interest that these underground compartments survived the restructuring of the area and are today incorporated into the network of underground passages which are pressed into service for minor scientific research projects conducted by the science faculty of the Sorbonne. This is not without its touch of irony as, for reasons to be seen later, Claude's society was not viewed with a friendly eye by the Sorbonne as it was then.

On the ground floor there were just two rooms; each of the other four stories was divided into three rooms. There was also an attic. One presumes that, early on, Claude secured one story for the use of the first group of students and for a common room. As the whole complex of the Gros Chapelet and the Rose Blanche had been designed from the start for use as apartments, the architect had allowed for some fifty separate fire-places, in addition to the main ones in the ground floor rooms. One presumes that kitchen facilities were available to this little community even if they dined off the left-overs from the Jesuits' kitchen; but just as there was no heating in the rooms at Louis le Grand one can be certain that the apartments used by the students seldom had experienced the luxury of a fire. The normal exit from the house was through a small yard opening on to rue des Poirées, but later, when they had to lease some rooms in the larger house – the Rose Blanche, they had direct access to rue Saint-Jacques from the larger common courtyard. The

students would have appreciated this direct exit as the streets around this block of buildings, being an island off the main thoroughfare, were often jammed with students and with carriages. When the students piled out onto the streets at the end of lectures they had to avoid the dangerous main road where carriages did not stop to accommodate them; so they tended to congregate in these side streets to continue their discussions, their arguments, and at times their fights. It was not the most comfortable passage from the college for the poor students, especially when they carried their food rations in improvised containers. It was these distractions caused by the milling crowds which eventually motivated Claude to seek for more secluded quarters; but for the moment he was rather happy to have secured accommodation so near their centre of studies and their vital source of victuals. One can be sure that other members of the Aa as well as their director, Fr. Le Tellier, gave a helping hand as Claude was setting up his little community.

It would be so helpful for the historian if a journal or some other contemporary jottings had survived to enable us to reconstruct an actual picture of the early days of this little community, but even if they had indulged in such a luxury at the time, the upsets caused by subsequent changes of premises, and the disruptions caused by wars, revolutions and confiscations, would have deprived us of all such sources of information. Most of the extant rule which Claude composed for the proper regulating of life in his seminary belongs to a later period and another building but the homeliness and the humanity which pervade that document help us to realise that from the start Claude must have been preoccupied with the welfare and the happiness of his little flock.

One can be sure that for the students this new set up was not merely a welcome haven from their previous worried existence but a veritable home where they shared so much of their lives, their meals, their studies and their prayers. They saw Claude sharing their lives as one of themselves, taking part in the common chores and seen to be just one of them as they went to and from class or on errands in the town. To understand what the change meant to Claude himself we have to exercise our imagination a little more. That he was happy to be able to expend so much of his time and thoughts on such a worthy cause we can be sure. And it must have given him a sense of fulfilment. So much of what he was doing now, in what he was at last discovering as being his special God-given-vocation, was what had attracted him in the various options he had examined during his Ignatian retreat.² All these different services were being realised in the one vocation of caring for the poor and neglected with the added bonus of preparing future pastors. But he would be less than human if he did not also feel that he was being called to make sacrifices which cost; not in the matter of parting with his material goods which he did very readily but in the sharing of the time and privacy which he had come to value so highly at Louis le Grand. He had learned to value time and the privacy of his own room not for selfish motives but in order to plan his devotions and his colloquies with the Lord whom he had discovered as the centre of his life. He was from now on at the beck and call of other people late and early and was to find that his mind was again getting caught up in this world and its preoccupations at the expense of his direct concentration on the Lord. Later he would be very forcibly struck by this gradual change, this falling away from his initial fervour, when he came to do some serious stock taking, but at the moment he was too busily occupied to be able to stand back and examine what was happening to himself. He was probably very interested in what was happening to the students as he was sizing up their temperaments, their various talents for the work of building up the community, and, as he told Grignon de Montfort, in trying to visualise what ministries they could best serve at in the future.³

FIRST STUDENTS

We know some of the early members of his community. All of them had this in common that they knew that they had been accepted by Claude because they had no personal means of support. This qualification was to be made a fundamental part of the rule of the seminary.⁴ Most of the original members happened to be from Brittany. This is quite in keeping with what the historian of Louis le Grand, Dupont-Ferrier, informs us that after the Parisians the Bretons were the most numerous in the college.⁵ But the explanation for the preponderance of Bretons among Claude's first students is to be found rather in their families or friends having had some connection with the des Places extended family. The names and subsequent careers of these students would have little interest outside a local context but we mention a few here as they help illustrate some aspect of Claude's life and work.

Almost all these students were very young. John B. Faulconnier, whom we have already met as being the first one to benefit from Claude's charity, was but sixteen years when Claude saw to it that he was for the moment housed in one of the Jesuit communities in Paris. Apart from illustrating Claude's spirit of enterprise this act shows that already he had the backing of someone highly placed in the Jesuit hierarchy. As soon as there was room for him at rue des Cordiers he was transferred there. He was later to serve faithfully in a small parish in the diocese of Orleans from where he wrote his brief but generous testimony to Claude's generosity which is now among the scant but precious contemporary papers dealing with Claude in the General Archives. Fr. Faulconnier, the first student of the seminary, died at St. Hilaire-St.-Mesmin, 17 December 1747 aged 60.⁶

It is not recorded how many students were actually lodged at Gros Chapelet by Pentecost 1703. The fact that there were around twelve students present at the initial dedication need not mean that they were all boarding together at the time. They were all attending the regular private meetings and may have been waiting till the end of the scholastic year to find places available in the same area of the house.

Among those on record as having joined at the beginning of the new school year was René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin aged sixteen from the diocese of Saint-Brieuc in Brittany. With a name like that one is not surprised to learn that he came from true Breton noble stock – but his parents, encumbered with debt, were not in a position to pay for his education. Allenou, who was to spend the final twelve years of his life on the mission in Canada where he died with a reputation for sanctity, is a significant witness in our search for an understanding of Claude and his work. He was to spend eleven years at the seminary as student and later as *repetiteur* in theology and as such he was in a privileged position to assimilate the ideals which Claude strove to impart to his charges. Allenou was one day to draft the rule for a congregation of sisters known as the Daughters of the Holy Spirit and who were also dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. Parts of the rule are taken literally from the one composed by Claude for the seminary; the additions he made by way of exhortations and guidance are so obviously inspired by Claude's spirit that they can be taken as providing useful indications of what must have been Claude's oral commentary on his more austere worded text when explaining it to his community.⁷

March 1704 saw the arrival of seventeen year old Peter Thomas from the diocese of Coutances in Normandy. He was one day to be a director in the seminary in Paris and later superior of the diocesan seminary of Verdun which was handed over by the bishop to the direction of the Society of the Holy Spirit in an effort to eradicate Jansenism from the diocese. For a period Fr. Thomas had joined

up with the Company of Mary, founded by Grignon de Montfort, emphasising the close links which had been forged between the two societies from the start. But Fr. Thomas' vital importance in the story of Claude and his work is that at some stage he undertook the task of composing his biography. Though this work as we have it in the extant manuscript is incomplete and is lacking in precise information about important events, yet it is invaluable as a document in that it has the stamp of authenticity coming as it did from one who had lived in close association with Claude over a number of years. The version of Thomas' manuscript used by the later biographers, Besnard and Clorivière, seems to differ in some details from the extant copy and may well have been a more complete version. Finally, as Thomas' biography seems to have been composed as material for spiritual conferences to be delivered to the students at the seminary, it is a witness to the spirit of that community in the years following Claude's early death.⁸

If there is any one member of that community founded by Claude whose life was to epitomise what was distinctive about its ethos – its evangelical poverty, simplicity and total trust in Providence, that man was Peter Caris. Enrolled as a student October 1704 he was destined to be identified with the seminary for the next half century, and not only did he faithfully maintain the spirit of its founder but he literally ensured the survival of the institute by his assiduous and successful begging tours around Paris day in day out. He was to become an institution in the area and was generally known as the Poor Priest. That he might be expected to be personally attached to Claude was to be expected from the close association between their families. Peter's father, in his profession as tailor, is on record as having done deals with Claude's father, and his mother's cousins were skilled tradesmen in the mint over which M. des Places presided as Juge Garde. Very devoted to Our Lady, Peter for a time joined the Company of Mary founded by Grignon but he was recalled by Fr. Bouic, Claude's successor as superior, because his presence and expertise as provider were considered vital to the survival of the community. When he died in 1757 he left that community a rich legacy, namely the memory of a long life renowned for service and sanctity. The inscription to his memory in the crypt of the seminary chapel at rue Lhomond reads: .. the Poor Priest, Servant of Mary and Procurator of this Seminary, lived always for God and for his neighbour, never for himself'. His body, however, following his explicit instructions, was, like Claude's, consigned to the common or paupers' grave.⁹

Another student inscribed on the rolls in October 1704, and who owed his being referred to the seminary to a friend of the des Places family, was Joseph Hédan. Joseph was to be the first student from the seminary to join with Grignon de Montfort's society thus being the first fruits of that union between the two societies which the founders had looked forward to.¹⁰

As all these students were young and just starting their studies for the priesthood they would not have been able to afford much assistance to Claude as he grappled with the problems arising in the practical management of his undertaking. He must then have appreciated the arrival from Gourin in Brittany of Jean Le Roy who was already advanced sufficiently in his studies to be due for ordination in 1705. Since Gourin was an ecclesiastical dependency of Langonnet Abbey, where one of the de Marbeuf family well known to the des Places was commendatory abbot, one presumes he was directed towards rue des Cordiers by Abbot de Marbeuf. Jean had already won the reputation in his diocese of being an excellent subject on whom solid hopes for the future were based. In the meantime he was to give welcome support to Claude until some other candidates were of age to act as repetiteurs and as junior directors.¹¹

The most welcome arrival, however, at rue des Cordiers, probably during

Christmas 1704, did not come as a student. Michael Vincent Le Barbier had been ordained in Rennes 15 September 1704 and was intended for service in that diocese. The exact details leading to his arrival at the seminary in Paris a few months later are not known but from the circumstances we can come to certain conclusions. Michael and Claude had known each other since infancy as the families had been closely associated. Michael's father was a notary and in that capacity had frequently been in liaison with Claude's father, but his links with the family had dated from his earlier years at his native town of Fougères where he had known Claude's mother well. Claude's mother had in fact been sponsor at the baptism of Michael's younger brother Pierre.¹²

Legal records and church registers reveal the links between the des Places and Le Barbier families. There are no documents to tell us why Michael left Rennes to assist Claude in Paris. It was much easier for a priest to make such a decision for himself in those days. It can be taken for granted that he knew he was needed by Claude as there was no priest member in the community as yet and Claude would now have to concentrate on his own studies in preparation for his ordination. There would be little difficulty for Michael in getting leave of absence as the des Places family was well known at the archbishop's office: He was legal adviser to the chancellery and a member of the Le Barbier family was printer for diocesan official publications. Fr. Julien Bellier would be all in favour of giving support to Claude in the type of work for poor students which he had learned about in Rennes. The experience to be gained by Fr. Le Barbier during his stay in Paris would be of value in the running of the seminary for poor students in Rennes. Le Barbier would have been a member of the Sodality of Our Lady at all three levels while doing his studies for the priesthood at the Jesuit College, and it is more than likely that he would have been co-opted by Fr. Bellier on to his special Aa type sodality group held in his own residence. It would be in the best tradition of the Aa for them to send one of their number to assist their confreres in Paris in their hour of need. A similar service by the Paris Aa in favour of a project for the poor in Rennes is on record at a later date. As to who took the initiative in contacting Fr. Le Barbier we do not know. The call could have come from Claude directly. It could also have happened that some member of the Jesuit community of Louis le Grand who was formerly well known in Rennes, took the initiative having realised that Claude was under severe pressure at the moment and needed such a companion and assistant if the work was to continue. One is not surprised then, not to say relieved in the tantalising absence of relevant contemporary documents, to learn that the director of the Aa, Fr. Le Tellier, had been professor of philosophy at Rennes, 1676-78, and that he had, in fact, been actively involved with the Sodality of Our Lady at the time when Julien Bellier was starting his philosophy course.

CRISIS

As the new scholastic year opened in October 1704 the numbers had increased considerably. No exact figure is available but the number would be already over the thirty mark.¹³ The burden of running such a community would also have greatly increased. Apart entirely from the financial and other material aspects there was the problem of organising the religious life of the community. In the absence of a priest in the house they had to go out each day to attend mass either in Louis le Grand or in one of the nearby churches or religious communities. The nearest public church as we have seen was Saint-Etienne des Grès, some fifty paces away. They were also beside the Dominican priory but it is not clear if outsiders were free to enter there for mass. The public did attend early mass at the abbey of

Saint-Victor which was some few hundred yards distant and where the shrine of Our Lady in the crypt drew large crowds especially when the saintly Fr. Simon Gourdan, its chaplain, was saying mass there. The fact that the community had to go outside for mass in the early years is reflected in the rule which enjoins that they were to return in silence after having assisted at mass in order to symbolise the continuation in their daily lives of their union with Christ in the Eucharist.¹⁴ For confessions and spiritual direction they were to approach the Jesuits only, as had also been the rule in the seminary for the poor in Rennes. This prescription was also included in the rule Claude wrote for the seminary.¹⁵

The new scholastic year was marked by a retreat, at first in the company of the other students at Louis le Grand. Once they were organised as a separate community they began the year with an eight day retreat preached by a Jesuit Father (Rule No. 3). But it was also prescribed in the rule that the Superior was to give regular formal instruction to the students. These conferences would cover all aspects of their life – studies, religious exercises, behaviour inside and outside the house, etc.

All these preoccupations, while trying to attend to his own studies, were bound to impose a severe strain on Claude at the best of times. What must have been a concern for himself and for others was what would happen if he were to encounter any serious upset in the matter of his health. What no one expected, not even Claude himself, was that he might undergo a spiritual crisis which could threaten to put the whole enterprise in jeopardy just as it showed such remarkable signs of success and was winning for him the admiration of many.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST

If there is any one document where Claude comes alive and where we can identify with him as he faces up to one of those personal crises which must be faced at some stage when seeking to discover God's will in the maze of life, it is in the paper entitled *Reflections on the Past*. The title is not in Claude's hand and indeed is misleading in that the main thrust of the document is not the past but the present and the future. It is part of an effort to discover the way ahead from reflecting on what had been happening in his own soul, and if it leaves many of our questions unanswered it is because it was not written to inform future historians: it was written most likely at the request of his spiritual director, some one who did not know him very well perhaps and who needed to be put in the picture, as it were, before he could give his considered advice. Perhaps also it was advised as a form of therapy for Claude in order to come face to face with himself and to be ready to accept the director's word as from God.

Once again the Aa literature may provide a clue to some of the unanswered questions. The manual advised all members to make a special annual general confession provided their director agreed to this. Notice was to be given early in Advent so that they would be ready to make that special confession at Christmas. The records show that it was not unusual for several of the Aa members to make a retreat at Christmas in the Jesuit novitiate at rue Pot de Fer. This particular retreat began each year on Christmas Day and lasted till 2 January. They also set out to persuade people with problems to do this retreat. Commenting on the outcome in such cases the writer says: "They come from this retreat so penetrated with the spirit of God that all which beforehand appeared difficult to undertake now became easy to achieve.."

It would well be then that Fr. Le Tellier, who would be aware of Claude's crisis of conscience, could have suggested to him that he should avail of this occasion to

reflect deeply on his situation, removed from the calls of duty. The seminary in the meantime would be looked after by Le Tellier and Claude's fellow members in the Aa. It looks likely also that Claude's friend, Fr. Michael Le Barbier, had arrived from Rennes to help out in the seminary and that Claude had been tempted to hand over control to him altogether. Claude, of course, bound by the secrecy of the Aa, makes no mention of any such details, but reading between the lines we can see that such a scenario fits in with what he has to tell us.

As to the document itself, it is written on unusual large format paper which Claude has divided into four separated sections as if he intended cutting it up into smaller format pages but never got round to it. Most likely it was just the most convenient format to hand where the retreat took place. The style of writing and the general presentation differ from that of the 1701 retreat notes. The hand is more mature and there is less attention to the presentation as if written under the pressure of circumstances rather than as a leisurely composed exercise. From internal evidence it would appear to have been written during the Christmas recess of 1704. What is clear is that this was not a regular or scheduled retreat for Major Orders as we can gather from these words when referring to his sense of the Lord's continual and special providence in his own life:

Always full of tenderness for me, unable to make up his mind to lose me after preserving me from the hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence through miracles rather than by the ordinary ways of his providence, he has allowed me to make this retreat at a time when I did not think of making one. Besides he has disposed everything in such a fashion that I can find a way of once more returning to my obligations without having to advance specious pretexts for doing so, as I did when I overburdened myself beyond authorized limits with the responsibility for those poor students whom providence is kindly taking care of.¹⁶

Claude feels that the Lord has been so loving in his personal care of him that he seems to be working special miracles to attain his purposes, one instance being the fact that the students would be taken care of while he had the opportunity he needed to reflect on what was happening in his own inner life. This may be a reference to the arrival of Fr. Le Barbier on the scene as well as to the general providence which saw to it that they were provided for from day to day through the good offices of Fr. Le Tellier and the bursar, Fr. Megret.

Claude's notes begin with the surprising statement: "If I had even a little love for God and my salvation, I ought to be inconsolable because of the way I have spent this year..."

We presume that these notes have been written during the Christmas of 1704. That was the year when he had been devoting himself so wholeheartedly to the work of expanding and consolidating the seminary and when all who were aware of what he was doing were in admiration of his achievement and at his life of total self abnegation. One would have expected then that Claude should have been feeling quite happy and experiencing a sense of fulfilment. But this very success and the esteem with which he was held was what was worrying Claude at the moment for reasons not known to those who were holding him up as a model in the secret reports of the Aa and elsewhere. His scrupulous conscience had led him to question if all this work was really being done for the glory of God. He had begun to fear that his original motives had not been as pure and selfless as he had given others to understand and that in fact the real driving force all along may have been his predominant passion of ambition and seeking grandeur; only the object of

these passions had changed. He had to face up to that fear which haunted him at a time when he was undergoing a particular spiritual crisis which crippled his power of judgement with regard to himself. As he puts it: "Since I am in a state of dryness and am hampered in efforts to discern God's sentiments in my regard how can I fly to him so as to cast myself at the feet of his mercy?"

Deeply disturbed by this "state of dryness" or spiritual aridity, Claude proceeds to describe it by contrasting his present state with how he felt eighteen months ago, all adding up to an alarming fall away from his new-found personal relationship with the Lord which followed his opting for the priesthood. With the gift of hindsight and the help of a more clinical analysis of the various stages in the development of the interior life of prayer, we are able to react to Claude's description of his personal experience as if it were a copybook example of what was but a normal stage in his personal development. But, then, the problem for Claude as for anyone passing through this difficult stage, was that the symptoms he experienced could just as readily be interpreted as signs of a real falling off in fervour attributable to a lack of cooperation with God's grace. A reason why Claude was advised to do a quiet retreat and to put on paper a clear outline of what he was experiencing was to prepare him for adopting an informed view of what was a painful crisis. In his notes we are made aware once again, as in the retreat notes of the Ignatian type retreat, that he has the gift of describing clearly the symptoms but lacks the ability to come to a diagnosis in his own case.

In the opening paragraph Claude refers back to the gift of his conversion when God snatched him from the worldly life he had been contemplating. He regards this as one of the many miracles of grace which gave him the opportunity of devoting himself totally to God's service:

More than three years ago by an extraordinary act of compassion he drew me from this world, broke the chains that held me prisoner, snatched me from Satan's claws, as it were in spite of myself, and clothed me once again in the garment of salvation. He worked miracles for me.¹⁷

The scriptural phrase from Isaiah "he clothed me in the garment of salvation" is often used in the liturgy in connection with Our Lady. Its use by Claude in this context, adding the word "again" may well be a reference to the fact that he was clothed in white by his parents till he was seven as a sign that he was specially dedicated to Our Lady. As an instance of the miracles worked for him he recalls that the Lord "had closed his eyes to an enormous crime which constituted my crowning iniquity" and even used the occasion to bring him closer to himself. This most probably refers to the incident when, because he considered his pride had been insulted, he had wounded the defenceless coachman on the road to Nantes. For some undisclosed reason he feels convinced that God had issued an invitation to closer union with him on that occasion but he had held back. He does not go into detail, but the message seems to be that he fears that once again he has failed to respond to the Lord as expected of him.

All I need do is to recall it here without putting it down on paper. Only God and my own heart ought never to forget this, his most startling act of mercy ever: God, so as to exact an act of gratitude without parallel; my heart, so as to love forever and exclusively such a bounteous benefactor.¹⁸

The next paragraph is even more tantalising in that it was written for God and himself only. It refers to some bargain that he had the audacity to make with God at that time, fixing his own conditions. The Lord took him at his word. Yet he

hesitated. And when he did eventually answer God's invitation, as he opted for the priesthood, he found himself showered with abundant consolations.

I received abundant consolations. When I was myself meditating on my disorders and on the mercy of my God tears flowed continuously from my eyes. Whenever I made any effort at all to approach the Lord that merciful Master immediately carried me on his shoulders for league after league. Finally I was able to do without the least effort what I have previously considered impossible for a man like me.¹⁹

Claude then goes on to recall some of the moments of fervour he had experienced during the eighteen months following his "conversion". There is nothing original in the experiences he recounts. In fact the only extraordinary thing about his recital is that unknown to himself he is but outlining what the textbooks on advanced prayer have catalogued as the unerring symptoms of the stage of spiritual development known technically as the state of affective prayer, that is when the person has passed beyond the stage of mere prayerful meditation on the truths of religion and has entered into a state of more personal relationship of love with the Lord. The soul feels itself unusually attracted to the Lord and to all that reminds it of him. Above all it suddenly finds itself willing and able to make generous sacrifices to prove this love. It is a real advance on the road of union with God but as yet rather imperfect in that it is very much a matter of the emotions and at times results in rather unrestrained and unbalanced behaviour.

The state of affective prayer has been exhaustively described by many spiritual writers, among them the Venerable Libermann who was one day to succeed Claude as head of the society he was now in the process of forming. Libermann was to become particularly renowned for the impetus which he gave in the nineteenth century to the mission to the black race, but he is also to be hailed as a master of the spiritual life, especially in the matter of spiritual direction. It will be of special interest in this context to cite from his analysis on the various symptoms of this stage of prayer and then to quote what Claude has recounted in his brief notes about his own personal experience.

One point made by Fr. Libermann is that the discovery of God being so close at hand and so lovable becomes such an overwhelming experience that the beginner wants to tell everyone about this discovery and finds conversation about any other subject to be tedious in the extreme.²⁰ Claude writing nostalgically about his own experience in the wake of his conversion has this to say:

It is fitting for me to call to mind at this point the moments of fervour I had the good fortune to experience when I first returned to God. What were my thoughts and desires at that time, what was my manner of life and what were my most ordinary occupations? I could, so to speak, think only of God. My greatest regret was that I could not think of him all the time. I wanted to love only him.

...I never tired of speaking about these favours. I found too few people to whom I could talk about them. I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I became scrupulous about keeping quiet when an opportunity arose to talk about him. I found people who spoke to me about other topics quite unbearable.²¹

One of the first consequences of this new found personal love of God is the awakening of a deep sorrow for past failures to appreciate the love of God and for one's sins which now take on the new perspective of acts of ingratitude.

Libermann describes at some length the “pains” suffered as a result of these convictions. Claude writes about his personal experience as follows:

During these moments of solitude I often recalled my past mistakes. I meditated on them at the beginning of my mental prayer. They even became my normal subject of prayer. My moral blindness caused abundant tears to flow. Day by day it appeared to be more and more opaque. That which two or three months before seemed quite an ordinary sin, with no particular malice, now looked infinitely more hideous. The malice itself grew daily before my very eyes, in proportion to the progress I made in my meditation before God. ... The anxiety engendered by the recollection of my past infidelities, together with the meditation of my past life lived in disorder and abominations, sometimes caused me such grief that my body itself was affected. I had become very thin and despondent though my health remained as good as ever...²²

A consequence of the realisation of the holiness of God and of one’s own sinfulness is an increase in the virtue of humility and the desire to be treated by others with scant respect. Claude, conscious of his deep-rooted hunger for acclaim and glory, naturally stresses this change in his outlook.

Profoundly ashamed and disgusted at such moments, I could no longer put up with myself, I lived in a spirit of humility. I despised myself and made this clear to those I met by taking pleasure in belittling myself before them. This virtue which, by an amazing effect of grace, I began to practise, after being perhaps the vainest man of the world of my time, drew down on me a great number of God’s blessings.²³

Libermann mentions a positive feature of this stage of spiritual development namely the ardent desire to remain constantly in the presence of God and the experience of a remarkable facility in keeping the mind and heart centred on this God of love and sweetness at all times. Claude, when regretting the loss of his facility in turning to God, describes how he felt formerly:

I spent a considerable amount of time before the Blessed Sacrament. These visits became my most frequent and most pleasant forms of recreation. I prayed for the greater part of the day, even while walking the streets, and I was immediately disturbed when I noticed that for some time I had lost the presence of him whom alone I desired to love. I met few people and came to appreciate solitude.

...I had learnt in my prayerful conversations with God to close my ears to all news, never to open my eyes to see things that might merely satisfy my curiosity, not even when walking through the city. I did not bother with the news and I did not look at anything beautiful. I did not want to rob God of a single moment. I wanted to think only of him and, though I was far removed from thinking of him always and often suffered rather long distractions, I never ceased filling my mind with him, sometimes even in my sleep and always at my first waking.²⁴

One rather unexpected characteristic of this state of prayer stressed by Libermann is the “gift of tears”; something not to be confused with any glandular affliction nor even a hyper-sensitivity to “tear-jerking” themes. The genuine gift of tears so called can be discerned by certain criteria and he describes it as “a great

tenderness for God accompanied by an intense desire to please him". Claude on several occasions referred to this phenomenon, once in connection with his reaction to receiving Holy Communion when he often found it impossible to stem the flood of tears. Also when contemplating his past disorders he remarked: "My eyes shed abundant tears at such times when I recalled my past aberrations".

Another strong reaction experienced by such people on their first taste of divine intimacy is that they find themselves for the moment like St Paul considering all created things as so much garbage to be discarded in order to savour the love of God unhindered. About this particular experience Claude writes:

For love of him I had renounced even the most legitimate attachments. I wanted to see the day when I would be penniless, living only on alms, after giving everything away. Of temporal possessions I intended to keep my health alone, so that I could sacrifice it entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after setting the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed the last drop of my blood for him whose blessings were ever before my eyes.²⁵

Other characteristics of this stage in the interior life mentioned by Libermann and recalled by Claude as personal experiences are the intense effort to do God's will in even the minutest matters as manifested by a strict fidelity to a rule of life, the undertaking of positive mortifications sometimes beyond moderation, the performing of works of charity in favour of one's neighbour, and finally a complete dependence on the advice of one's spiritual director.

With regard to Claude's meticulous adherence to his regulation we read:

Although I did not go very far in all this and consoled myself with the hope that I would do infinitely more in the future, at least I was faithful to my exercises and would have considered it a very grave crime to take my meals, however busy I was, without previously nourishing my mind with that salutary food of which I partake in mental prayer.²⁶

Compassion for his neighbour and blind obedience to his spiritual director are dealt with by Claude in the same paragraph as follows:

I could add occasional impulses of compassion which I felt towards those who suffer; a fair amount of kindness, after all my past pride, towards those I dealt with; an ardent zeal to urge sinners to return to God – this went so far that, in order to succeed, I would have found nothing too degrading; finally a blind obedience to my director whose orders I respected so much that I would have been incapable of doing the least thing without having previously obtained his permission.²⁷

In his final comments on this stage of affective prayer Fr. Libermann, having dealt with the advantages, goes on to mention certain symptoms of imperfection in the manner if not in the substance of beginners' behaviour, especially in the pursuit of mortifications and humiliations in a frenzied attempt to make reparation for the sufferings borne by Christ. Libermann, not having known anything about Claude's experiences at the time of writing his notes on prayer, refers to the excesses of the well known saints, Bernard, Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola and he states that these excesses of love seem to happen in those who are destined to go far in the way of perfection.²⁸ Claude refers only in passing to his own acts of mortification:

It was from partaking of Jesus' body that I drew the detachment which led me to despise the world and its ways. I cared little for its esteem and even tried sometimes to displease it by contravening its conventions. Jesus Christ crucified was the subject which most frequently occupied my mind and, in spite of the love of my body which still held me in its sway, I began to do violence to myself and undertake some small mortifications.²⁹

We have already seen some of those "small mortifications" but Fr. Thomas informs us that he had seen a document, no longer extant, in which Claude had sought permission from his director for "astounding and frightful mortifications".

(He continually mortified himself in a murderous way.) True he subsequently diminished these frightful mortifications somewhat. This was, however, not due to any diminution of fervour, but because his director explicitly commanded it and those in whom he confided advised it. Add to this the fact that Claude had originally planned to train not priests but holy religious who would indulge in rigorous penances if God called them to the cloister. Since his death I came across a rough draft of a letter which he addressed to his director. In it he set forth the resolution he had taken to practise astounding and frightful mortifications. And yet, these appeared slight in his eyes compared to what he felt he had to do in order to expiate his sins and merit heaven. He presented those motives to his director in the most vivid manner, hoping to obtain the latter's approbation and permission to fulfil the resolution.³⁰

Lest one should conclude that Claude was exceptional or abnormal by the standards of his time in the matter of wanting to inflict these "astounding and frightful" mortifications on himself one has only to read the account given of the exercises in mortification indulged in by Grignon de Montfort while he was a student at Saint-Sulpice seminary, and in this case we are assured by Blain, Grignon's schoolmate at Rennes and later at Saint-Sulpice, that he had the full approval of the seminary director.³¹ The penitential exercises enumerated by Blain are shocking indeed by our standards and one comes to the conclusion that the Jesuit tradition in spiritual direction helped restore a certain balance in this area of ascetism as against not merely the rigours of Jansenism but also the almost savage severity of the school of de Berulle and his followers de Condren and Olier – the founder of Saint-Sulpice.

Libermann in summing up the characteristics of this transitional stage with its swings from heady joys to intense emotional suffering, adds: "This stage lasts more or less time according to the will of him who gave it. There are those who remain like that for a year or eighteen months. Others for a longer or shorter period".

Claude summing up his own experience during the eighteen months that followed his arrival at Louis le Grand writes:

I had the happiness to live like this for eighteen months, my happiness overflowing quite naturally when I noticed my beginnings of regularity increase. I say "beginnings" for I was far from believing that this state of virtue was sufficient and that I was now leading as holy a life as I ought. I had not left the world long enough to stop the bad habits I had contracted from mixing an infinity of imperfections and sins with my small virtues. It is true that God who knew the depths from which he had rescued me and who

had been satisfied, at the beginning of my conversion, with the least of my efforts, still knew how to be satisfied with the little that I gave him in the hope that eventually I would give him much more. He did not enter into judgement with his poor little servant because he knew my weakness and the depth of the abyss out of which I had just climbed. I was not in a condition where I could be fully satisfied with myself. I took a strict account of myself and realised that I was far from arriving at the destination I should have reached had I responded faithfully to the graces God offered me every day.³²

Claude has no illusions then that, in spite of the effervescence of his feeling of being close to God and committed to his will at all times in the ordinary events of each day and when called on to make big sacrifices, he still carried with him not merely the memories of his past infidelities but also the same basic faults. What worries him now is that he feels that he has fallen away from even the levels reached earlier on. He comments: "If my want of fidelity at that time caused me such deep sorrow, what should I not feel today, when I consider my present wretched state of lukewarmness!"

Before moving on to the next stage of Claude's development, we turn to the contemporary entries in the Aa records given in the letter to Toulouse. There are some details which correspond with Claude's own words about his behaviour at this stage and with what Fr. Thomas has to say about him. In particular, no. VIII in the block entries seems to reflect Claude as he would have been at Christmas 1701, the first renewal session he would have attended. Though not absolutely certain then that it applies to Claude we quote it here:

Another confrere fasts every Friday in honour of the passion of Our Lord and every Saturday in honour of the Blessed Virgin. He makes it his greatest pleasure to visit the hospital to instruct the poor and to help them (materially). He tries to win over others to be devotees of Mary. When any one speaks disparagingly of her in the course of conversation he tries to head off such conversation by his silence or by defending her as he judges most appropriate. He also tries to see that his conversation always deals with God's message and if he has to speak of other matters he will make a passing mention to God. He visits the Blessed Sacrament four times each day. Before starting any activity he offers it to Our Saviour and every quarter hour he makes an act of love of God.

DARK NIGHT

For Claude the main part of his personal notes is the account he gives of his current state of soul. He paints a pretty black picture not merely as regards the passing of his former fervour to be replaced by spiritual dryness but above all the return of a crop of faults which shock him. Once again the state of soul Claude describes with such clarity and severity can be paralleled from the spiritual authors, among them the great saints who have written about their spiritual progress: St Bernard, St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, all stressing in various ways the purification the soul must undergo as it is called from the earlier stages of prayer to the higher states of closer union with God. Not merely are the consolations at the sense level withdrawn but a darkness descends as the imperfect lights go out. Part of the process is that the illumination coming from closer union with God reveals more clearly the warts and weaknesses of the person's own self and style of life. Claude looking at things, not with the gift of hindsight or through the pages of the spiritual masters, spoke as follows about his own state of soul:

Tears of blood would not have been too strong a means of bewailing my wretchedness. It is true to say that I have never been what I ought to be, yet I have at least been much better than I am at present. Happy would I be had I lost only half of what I had acquired by grace. Alas! I am no longer aware of the presence of God. I never think of it when I am asleep and almost never when I awake. I am always distracted even during my prayers.

I have become slipshod in my meditations. I have no fixed method or subject and no set time for it. I often cut short the time assigned to it and to my spiritual reading. All flavour and fervour have disappeared. I have lost the gift of tears both during prayer and at Holy Communion.

I am no longer eager to eat the food of angels, no longer recollected afterwards.³³

As we try to understand how Claude felt and as we are perhaps somewhat taken aback by his revelations, it is reassuring to hear the great St Bernard admitting to much the same sentiments:

No longer am I able to shed tears of contrition, because of my exceeding obduracy. I find no pleasure now in psalmody, no satisfaction in pious reading, no consolation in prayer, no taste for my customary meditations. Where now are those spiritual transports which I once enjoyed? Where that serenity of soul, that peace and joy in the Holy Spirit? Therefore am I become slothful in labour, drowsy at vigils, prone to anger, obstinate in antipathies, more indulgent to the tongue and the palate, less vigorous and zealous in preaching.³⁴

More disquieting perhaps for Claude, who so recently took the most severe mortification in his stride both in what he denied himself and in the punishment he inflicted on himself, is that he now finds that even the smallest forms of mortification cost an effort:

No longer do I have the courage, as I used to, to mortify myself constantly in one thing or another, were it just keeping a foot in a less comfortable position. I had adopted these practices so generously, to remind myself at every moment of the day that I should do penance continually for the life lived by a body which I could never punish sufficiently.

I do not keep watch over my senses any more, but speak willingly about indifferent matters, look at everything and listen to everything. No longer have I that holy readiness to speak about God, while I talk easily about other things.³⁵

When he recalls the zeal with which as a member of the Aa he at first set out to try to win the world around him for Christ and was ready to be despised for his pains, he is naturally shocked that he lacks any feeling of enthusiasm and genuine humility:

I have little zeal for the correction of my brethren, grow weary as soon as I fail, and forget to recommend such undertakings to God, as I jog along thoughtlessly and inconsiderately.

No longer do I despise the esteem of the world but am eager to be considered a virtuous man. I even make a pretence of doing things which perhaps I would not do and to which formerly, when I sought only the esteem of God, I paid little attention. I even flatter people rather willingly, etc.³⁶

Most humiliating of all perhaps were the petty faults and mean thoughts that have sprouted up like a crop of weeds all over the soil which he had cultivated for austere and virtuous living. The searching light of his sensitized conscience is turned mercilessly on his inner self bringing home to him that in spite of his heroic deeds in the service of the students he had still to cope with his own unredeemed humanity:

I am far from being mild in my words and manners. I am often proud, curt and fastidious; I am arrogant and bitter in my speech, lukewarm and tedious in reprimanding. I look gloomy to show I am in bad humour. I am very sensitive with respect to my family and reluctant to reveal that my father and mother sell linen and wax. I am afraid that people will find out about it. I do not make it known sufficiently that I have no share in the work of the poor students' house. On the contrary I derive some satisfaction from it when people who know me only a little or not at all think I am a rich man who spends his fortune on these young people.³⁷

While living in the privacy of his own room at Louis le Grand it was easy for him to build up the conviction that he was alright with God and his neighbour. All was so neatly planned and timed. The sound of the bell was *Vox Dei*, the voice of God summoning him to prayer, to meals, to class etc. All this routine had given him a great sense of security. Now all that had changed. He had to live his life on the run and he was no longer able to keep his various reassuring appointments with Almighty God:

I have become lax in doing my duty to God and to my studies. I work and pray as it were by fits and starts. I rearrange the tasks for definite hours time after time. I am irregular even in regard to the hours of meals, eating now early now late, taking dinner sometimes at 3 o'clock and supper at 9 o'clock. Yet day after day I make firm resolutions to change my life. I am tired of being so irregular yet I finish up following my own ideas and whims without referring, as I used to do, to my director, for whom I have substituted, so to speak, my own fancies.³⁸

What frightens Claude now is that he feels that he has lost all the ground he thought he had made, and that due to his endemic inconstancy he finds himself again on the slide as so often in the past, except that this time the consequences could be more serious as the fall would be from a greater height:

To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am someone who is believed to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past. Alas! I am merely a mask of devotion and the shadow of my former self. Blessed am I in my extreme misfortune if I do not fall away more but stop where I am and use the grace God offers me to reflect more seriously than ever on my pitiable state, so as to prevent my falling into greater disorders. It is in this very way that so many people who were eminent in virtue began to slide downwards and ended by perishing miserably. Who ought to fear a similar fall more than I who throughout life have so frequently shown my inconstancy by returning to God and then later on falling into such prolonged disorders?³⁹

At this stage one is prompted to speculate as to whether Claude was acquainted with any of the classics on the spiritual life. There was no shortage of such works

in French at the time. Even the works of the great Spanish mystics had been very quickly published in French translations. So one wonders what Claude's reaction would have been on opening the *Dark Night* by St John of the Cross only to discover that one hundred and twenty years earlier he had so vividly described a state of soul so very like what he had been experiencing of late. When speaking of the painful purification suffered by the soul on contact with the "divine light" St John uses the expressive image of the effect of fire on the fresh wood cast into it:

The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odour. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents which are contrary to fire.

St John goes on then to apply this imagery to the purification process which takes place in the soul.

Similarly, we should philosophize about this divine, loving fire of contemplation. Before transforming the soul, it purges it of all contrary qualities. It produces blackness and darkness and brings to the fore the soul's ugliness; thus the soul seems worse than before and unsightly and abominable. This divine purge stirs up all the foul and vicious humours of which the soul was never before aware; never did it realize there was so much evil in itself, since these humours were so deeply rooted. And now that they may be expelled and annihilated they are brought to light and seen clearly through the illumination of this dark light of divine contemplation. Although the soul is no worse than before, neither in itself nor in its relationship with God, it feels undoubtedly so bad as to be not only unworthy that God should see it but deserving of His abhorrence; in fact, it feels that God now does abhor it.⁴⁰

Claude would certainly have appreciated that account given in generic terms as he would also have understood the testimony of that other founder of a seminary, M. Olier, when describing his personal experience of a similar unnerving spiritual aridity.⁴¹

The spiritual author dealing with such purifying experiences of the soul who was most frequently consulted at the time in France was Fr. John Surin, SJ. Because of his own excruciating experiences he was qualified to give helpful advice. As his *Catechism Spirituel* had been published in Rennes 1657 it would have been well known in the retreat house at Rennes, and his *Lettres Spirituelles* had been published at Nantes just when Claude arrived there.⁴² Grignon de Montfort availed of Surin's wisdom when going through a spiritual crisis during his years as a student for the priesthood in Paris. But we are probably on surer ground when we suggest that Claude may have been acquainted with another well known Jesuit author, Fr. Rigoleuc, who had also been closely associated with St Thomas' College at Rennes. His work on the interior life was published by Fr. Champion of the Jesuit retreat house at Nantes. Rigoleuc had been a student under Père Lallemand, SJ., and his best selling manual on the spiritual life was the first of a number of books setting forth Lallemand's teaching which had been the inspiration of Claude's choice of title for his community. Though one can not say for certain that Claude had been using Rigoleuc's manual for his own guidance and in his talks to the students, one finds echoes of his counsels in the final section of the "Reflections on the Past". Rigoleuc poses the very question which agonises

Claude and proceeds to give certain guidelines along which each individual might answer for himself:

But in what way can these aridities and desolations be distinguished as proceeding from the operation of God, rather than from some fault and deficiency of our own? We must believe that they come from God, –

1. When no more satisfaction is derived from sensual things than from spiritual, and that we have an equal disrelish for the one, as for the other; for then God is not content with weaning the soul from His consolations and ordinary graces, but He so mingles wormwood in all things.

2. When we are severely affected to see ourselves so cold and so dull with regard to God and divine things; for tepid and negligent souls neither feel their faults, nor the little service they render to God...⁴³

As Claude grapples with his own painful experience and expresses his fears that he has lost close contact with Almighty God, he is not altogether without hope. He gives his reasons:

I have to believe also that the good Lord will again have pity on me if I return to him with all my heart. Since I am now in a state of dryness and am hampered in my efforts to discern God's sentiments in my regard how can I fly to him so as to cast myself at the feet of his mercy? Nevertheless the Lord's past conduct towards me gives me hope.

(i) He did not allow me at any time to be satisfied with myself. On the contrary I have always been anxious and sorrowful about my disorders.

(ii) He has always given me the grace to see that interiorly I was not in the least what others thought or said I was.

(iii) He never allowed me to get rid of my scruples. Though these have to some degree contributed to my disturbed state they have also made me go to confession more frequently and have given me greater remorse when the occasion to offend God presented itself.⁴⁴

Claude ends this explanatory section with a powerful image of his trauma and with a profession of hope:

All this conduct on God's part makes me hope that the vault of heaven will not be always like an iron clamp above my head if I sincerely bewail my sins and seek to live once more by God's grace.

The object of all this exercise in recounting the change that had taken place in his interior state, this falling away from his former fervour, is to try to trace its cause and to see what can be done to remedy the matter. He is confident that God's love for him has not changed, that it is he himself who has changed. Yet he feels in his heart that he cannot go on without regaining that personal relationship with God which made life worth living. He fears that this love relationship has in some way been disrupted by the manner in which he had acted in undertaking the work for the students, ostensibly for the love of God. Finally he professes that he is ready now to face up to a painful reappraisal of his involvement in this work:

Filled with this holy confidence, thanks once more to the grace of God, I am going to examine, without taking into consideration what is most agreeable to nature, which is the shortest road to lead me back to the one without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace for a single moment. In the first place

I will suppose that the reason for my laxity (or, to speak more honestly, for my falls and my aberrations) is the fact that I abandoned solitude too soon, became involved in outside work, undertook the project for the poor scholars and strove to keep it going. I did not have a sufficiently strong foundation in virtue for such an undertaking. I had not yet acquired enough humility to put myself at the head of such a work. A ten-year's retreat to reflect only on myself, after a life like mine, would not have been too long.⁴⁵

When Claude surmised that he might have been better occupied if he had spent ten years in prayerful solitude as a preparation for such work, he was but expressing the temptation that haunts many saintly apostolic workers when busily engaged in the active life. If only they could escape from it all and be alone with God, then they could really advance in virtue. The Curé D'Ars felt like that when he abandoned his confessional in pursuit of a cloistered life; Blessed Daniel Brottier, CSSp, also felt like that when he opted to abandon the African mission field in order to enter the Cisterians instead in the secluded island of Lerins. St Teresa of Avila, mystic and all that she was, had this advice for those who might feel called to hide in solitude when the Lord was calling them to action either through obedience or through charity:

It is here, my daughters, that love is to be found – not hidden away in corners but in the midst of occasions of sin; and believe me, although we may more often fail and commit small lapses, our gain will be incomparably the greater. Remember I am assuming all the time that we are acting in this way out of obedience or charity: if one of these motives is not involved, I do not hesitate to say that solitude is best. And, even if we are acting as I say, we may still have a desire for solitude, for that desire is ever present in souls which truly love God. The reason I say we gain more in the other way is that it makes us realize what we are and of how much our own virtue is capable. For if a person is always recollected, however holy he may think himself to be, he does not know if he is patient and humble, and he has no means of knowing it. A man may be very strong, but how can he be sure he is if he has not proved himself in battle? O God, if only we could realize our own weakness.⁴⁶

Claude too had a feeling that the problem of his falling off in fervour did not come from the work itself; it had presented no obstacle to his union with God in the beginning. He suspects that its very success was the trap set for him by Satan, namely to vitiate all by making use of his special weakness – his pride. But he is not sure, and that is his dilemma:

I know of course that if I faithfully made use of all God's graces I could really be on my guard and remain steadfast in the midst of my occupations. I can judge this to be true by recalling the beginnings when I had not yet completely lost my fervour. But that was when the whole thing was more obscure and almost buried, as it were, in the most lowly dust. At that time I could, so to speak, control myself, and so I was able to believe somehow that I was not undertaking anything other than the will of God. Nevertheless it was difficult for me to persevere without losing my head. It was an insidious way, made all the more dangerous because it seemed good, of bringing pride back little by little into my heart. The aim was to overcome me and hurl me, by use of the same trap which caused me to fall before, into worse disorders if possible than those into which I had already fallen. Thus I am sure I would not be wrong in thinking that on that occasion the devil transformed himself into an angel of

light. I do not quite know what to think. What happened makes me fear that I may have made a mistake.⁴⁷

One can understand the basis of Claude's fears about his motives even when on the surface he seemed to be covered by the fact that he had the approval of his spiritual director to undertake the work and had been encouraged by other "enlightened persons". But then, though he might not have intended to deceive anyone, he feels that he had not sufficiently revealed the fundamental flaw in his temperament, his "predominant passion" of ambition and vanity as had been confirmed during his decisive retreat. He might not have intended to deceive anyone at the start but he may have deceived himself. And on this note he finishes his analysis:

It is true that I did not undertake the work without the permission of my director. But here again my conscience reproaches me, as it has frequently done before. How did I present the work to him? What tricks did I not use? At first I said it was only a matter of feeding four or five scholars quietly, without any fuss whatsoever. Perhaps at that time I did not reveal the full extent of my ambitions and vanity. I have therefore every reason to fear and tremble before God, because in all these consultations I did not use the candour, simplicity and openness that I ought to have done. These reflections fill me with sorrow. I left the world to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed my object in life while remaining at heart exactly the same? What then was the use of undertaking this work?⁴⁸

We can give Claude full marks for the clear statement of his case. We can also admire the honesty with which he questions himself. It is not merely the success of the undertaking that is at stake now. For Claude what is at stake is the nature of his own involvement in the work. He seems ready to quit if that is what the Lord's known will speaking through the apparent loss of his personal close relationship with him. He is determined to let his director know the full facts and be guided by his decision.

We do not know the identity of Claude's director and we have not any record of his decision. From subsequent events it is clear that he must have reassured Claude that he was where the Lord wanted him to be and that it was his bounden duty to continue in spite of his scruples and in spite of his present spiritual aridity.

There are tantalisingly few biographical clues given in these notes and unfortunately there is not much to go on either from other sources. Yet one is tempted to ask what were the circumstances which had made it possible for Claude at this stage to contemplate abandoning the undertaking, considering the implications for the students. There must have been some one else available who was judged able and willing to step in. That person must have been his life long friend, Fr. Michael Vincent Le Barbier, arrived from Rennes to help. And one is left with the impression that Claude knew that there were others who were following the operation of the Seminary at close range and who could be relied on not to allow the work to founder if he had to withdraw from being its director.

One is justified also in wishing to know the identity of the director whose advice was so decisive for Claude that he never looked back again. It is unlikely that it was his normal director at Louis le Grand whether that be the director of the Aa, Fr. Le Tellier or his confessor. The retreat must have been done in some area removed from the distractions of his work and studies. The obvious place would have been the Jesuit novitiate at rue Pot de Fer. Not merely would he have the requisite secluded atmosphere but there would be no lack of spiritually informed fathers.

It was there Grignon de Montfort had gone for guidance two years earlier when he returned to Paris as to the road he should follow in his pastoral mission. The noted director, Fr. Nicholas Sanadon, had refused to solve Grignon's problems but he seems to have had no difficulty in pointing out God's will to Claude.

SIMON GOURDAN

Another possibility is that the man in whom Claude placed such great trust was that other renowned spiritual director, Fr. Simon Gourdan, a member of the Canons Regular of St Augustine at St Victor's Abbey.

Both Frs Besnard and Clorivière, quoting probably from the same source, make it a point to mention that when the news spread that Claude was critically ill "certain persons distinguished by their piety and rank came to see him". Besnard concludes as follows: "The saintly Fr. Gourdan, to whom he (Claude) was bound by the strongest ties of friendship, also sent someone to visit him on his behalf".

The "saintly Fr. Simon Gourdan" was one of the most remarkable and sought after men in Paris at the time. Born in Paris he had been educated by the Jesuits at Collège de Clermont i.e. Louis le Grand. At an early age he joined the Canons Regular of St Augustine at St Victor's Abbey nearby. Founded by William Champeaux in 1113, St Victor's became a great centre of scholarship and pastoral spirituality. Its ideal of combining the monastic life, study, and pastoral ministry, spread through many lands including Britain and Ireland, where communities of the Canons Regular multiplied. But by the end of the 17th century the community in Paris had settled for a life of mediocrity. So much so that the disappointed Simon Gourdan, in his search for a life of strict religious observance, joined the Trappists under l'Abbé de Rancé. Armand de Rancé (1626-1700) had left a life of luxury and intellectual triumph to live under the most austere discipline of St Bernard. As commendatory abbot of the Cistercian monastery of La Trappe, he reformed it and created the order of Trappists, with a return to a life of asceticism and contemplation. He exercised a remarkable attraction on souls eager for perfection and many famous men, including Bossuet, came frequently to make retreats with him. After a period of trial as a novice there Gourdan was told by de Rancé that what God wanted of him was to return to St Victor's and to strive by his life and his teaching to lead the community back to the strict observance of its original rule. And he would also be better placed to influence a wider circle.

A staunch defender of the prerogatives of Mary, especially her Immaculate Conception, he was appointed chaplain to the Marian shrine in the crypt of the abbatial church. As word of his ascetical life, his devotional writings and his charism for reading souls spread abroad, crowds flocked to assist at his mass and to seek his spiritual guidance. Still living the austere life of a Trappist he vowed never to leave the cloister, he never ate meat, drank only water, slept only for a few hours on an improvised bed and spent the rest of his life in prayer and study. Under the command of obedience he made himself available to the pilgrims for spiritual counselling but would never hear confessions out of humility. In his many writing he encouraged the practice of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to the Sacred Heart and Our Lady. Influenced by Fr. de Condren he developed the concept of Christ as the eternal victim, especially in the book "The Eternal Sacrifice", and he was an advocate of the spirituality of "total annihilation" of the human ego under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Though a great scholar he scorned a university degree. As the Jansenist controversy raged in Paris in connection with the famous Case de conscience 1701-3 he reprimanded his community for their connivance with the Jansenists and implored the Archbishop

of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles, to stand up on the side of orthodoxy.⁴⁹ In this he was acting in solidarity with the Jesuits at Louis le Grand, in particular Fr. Le Tellier. And it is on record that Fr. Gourdan was particularly linked with Claude's other professor for scripture, Fr. John Martine.⁵⁰

From the fact that it is clearly stated that there was a close tie of friendship between this saintly recluse and the young founder who was 23 years his junior, we are justified in concluding that they must have had much in common. They had points in common as regards ascetical style of life, their devotions, – especially their devotion to Our Lady, their attitude to university degrees, their opposition to Jansenism. One may sense that there is an indication of the influence of Gourdan's work on the "Eternal Sacrifice of Christ" in Claude's prayer to the Blessed Trinity where he mentions that he is offering his personal prayer in union, not merely with the sacrifices being offered at that moment but also with all the sacrifices that have ever been offered or will ever be offered in the future. Finally, when Fr. Thomas wrote that Claude's original idea was to train not priests but holy religious who would indulge in rigorous penances if God called them to the cloister, it is possible that at that time he may have been influenced by Gourdan who still was pining for the strict model of religious life revived by de Rancé. It may well have been his conversations with Grignon de Montfort which made Claude concentrate more on giving the students the formation which would enable them to undertake pastoral work in neglected areas. One of the few incidents recorded about Claude's methods of guiding his students in making a choice of vocation in keeping with their temperament was when he gently but firmly dissuaded an unsuitable candidate from trying to enter a contemplative order. The event which cemented Claude's friendship with the "saintly Fr. Gourdan" may well have been a similar service he had done for himself when he confirmed him in his own special vocation and encouraged him to persevere in his work for the poor students in spite of his scruples and his spiritual aridity.

, je ne souffrirais que de
l'aimer, et pour mériter son amour j'aurais
renoncé aux attachements même les plus
chers de la vie. Je voudrais recevoir un jour
denier de tout, ne vivant que d'aumônes après
avoir tout donné, je ne prendrais ni vengeance
de tout les biens temporels que la santé.
dont je souffrirais faire un sacrifice entier à –
Dieu dans le travail des missions, trop de
seurs. Si après avoir embrassé tout le
monde de l'amour de Dieu, j'aurais pu donner
jusqu'à la dernière goutte de mon sang
pour celui dont les bienfaits m'éloignent toujours
présents

Autograph from Claude's Reflections

Caught in Crossfire

1705 saw Claude's seminary take on a new dimension. Several facts contributed to this. Claude had been under pressure, as we have seen, from within and from without. He had been over extended in his efforts to cope single-handed with the direction of his community while trying to attend to his own studies. Even though he readily admitted that it was Providence that was taking care of the students in so many ways, he still carried the sole responsibility day in day out for the survival and smooth running of the establishment. And as each of the thirty or forty students was a distinct individual with his own personal problems we can be sure that most of their worries ended up on Claude's shoulder. In the notes entitled 'Reflections on the Past' he admitted that at times he had failed in his duties to the students:

I am far from being mild in my words and manners. I am often proud, curt and fastidious; I am arrogant and bitter in my speech, lukewarm and tedious in reprimanding. I look gloomy to show that I am in bad humour . . . I have become lax in doing my duty to God and to my studies...¹

Allowing for some exaggeration in the painting of a very black picture of his falling off from the high standards he had originally set for himself, we can sense that he was certainly feeling the strain. He was not dealing with a community of saints who always did the right thing. He could not be in all places at all times to oversee the conduct of these growing young men, many of whom were untutored in so many areas of human behaviour. That they looked to him for advice and support was in itself amazing, considering that he was but one of themselves as far as clerical status and experience went. The fact then that he had to set the standards and come up with instant solutions to their problems, when he was striving to cope with his own crisis, must have been taxing in the extreme. One consequence was that he had postponed his own advancement to minor orders and thus retarded his approach to ordination.

FR LE BARBIER – FIRST SPIRITAN PRIEST

Now matters had changed. Claude had been confirmed in his vocation during the days spent in recollection under the guidance of a trusted spiritual director. He had been given the opportunity to see his way through the trees and had been assured that he was not going it alone; the Lord was most definitely with him. But the Lord works mostly through people. The presence of Fr. Michael Vincent Le Barbier was certainly a gift from the Lord. For the first time there was a priest-member of the community, and though there was no question of his taking over command from Claude, his presence and moral support made the world of difference to Claude in his administration. It also meant much to the students. Finally, the public image of Claude's work took on a new dimension as from then.

To Ml.V. Le Barbier, then, belongs the honour of being the first ordained Spiritan – a member, that is, committed to work for the interests of this community as his priority. That his presence was a milestone is obvious and that he was a vital formative influence. And yet we have to admit that little is known about his actual contribution to the running of the seminary anymore than we know of the

help given by Fr. Le Tellier and the Aa students. We have already seen that he was a close friend of the des Places family as he and Claude grew up together, attending St Thomas' College where he did all his studies for the priesthood, having gone on to study his theology while Claude was pursuing his legal studies at Nantes. It can be taken for certain that Michael would have been a member of the special sodality of Our Lady conducted by the faculty of theology and given his background it would be unlikely that he had not been coopted by Fr. Bellier into the special sodality group which he conducted in his own residence. Michael having opted for the diocesan priesthood was obliged by the diocesan decree of 1696 to present himself at the diocesan seminary being conducted at Rennes for the diocese since 1672 by the Eudist Fathers. As the Eudists were also involved since 1697 with Fr. Julien Bellier in managing the seminary hostel for the poor scholars, it is to be presumed that Michael would be familiar with the conditions and the regulations there. So he would be coming to rue des Cordiers with some useful previous experience.

Another asset possessed by Fr. Le Barbier was that in having done all his studies at the Jesuits' college he would have little difficulty in adapting to the system and the syllabus of studies at Louis le Grand. Not that he needed to pursue any further studies for his own advantage but as one of his main contributions to Claude and the students would be in the capacity of 'repetiteur' or tutor, it would be necessary for him to sit in at the lectures at the various courses. We shall see that in the regulations Claude was already drafting for the efficient ordering of life in his seminary, certain guidelines were being laid down for the conduct of the revision classes where the material covered in the lectures at Louis le Grand was repeated and teased out to prepare for the special testing sessions at the college later and to make sure that students who had fallen behind in class would have the matter explained in more detail.²

But the main difference made by Fr. Le Barbier's presence was that henceforth they had one of their own community to celebrate the Eucharist in their own house at a time most suitable to all. It is to be presumed that up till now all attended mass early each morning either in one of the chapels for the students at the college or in a nearby public church. It may well be that in the room set aside for common prayer in the Gros Chapelet they also had permission to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved and that a Jesuit priest came weekly to say mass there. One cannot be certain about conditions prior to the arrival of Fr. Le Barbier but from early January 1705 they had the privilege of having the Eucharist offered in the room where they met for prayer in common.

The known effect of this innovation would be to create and foster a strong sense of community among the members. It was in celebrating the Eucharist together that the first Christians gradually discovered their own separate identity as distinct from their fellow Jewish worshippers. And though provision was made in the rule of the community that all were free to attend the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays and Feast Days in the parish churches in the locality, from now on the celebration that mattered was the Eucharist offered by Fr. Michael and for which they prepared all according to the liturgical rubrics of the day – the ceremonies, the singing, the church ornamentation etc. – all of which matters which were part of their formation as future pastors. These details would also be spelt out in the guidelines now being laid down in the light of their experience.³

A further consequence of having their own minister of the Eucharist and their chapel with reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, was that in the eyes of the public they were henceforth more defined as a community – a seminary in reality if not in name. Fr. Thomas remarked that in the beginning their community was

so small and hidden that people were unaware of their separate existence, and as the significance of the work was not known the charity of the people did not flow in their direction. There was as yet no organised system of questing or the seeking of contributions from those who might be expected to favour their work, but money had to be procured from some source to pay for their board and at times to help clothe those who were so poor that all they literally had when applying for acceptance was the shirt on their back. Where funds came from in the early days is not recorded for posterity. Claude just said that Providence took care of them. But one suspects that Claude himself as one of his many chores had to act as beggar for Christ. There were critics of the seminary in later years who stated that the Jesuits had used him as a cover because of his vast fortune which they persuaded him to use for this purpose to their advantage, but as we know there was no foundation for this statement. Claude had his own scruples about his reaction to such gossip. He wrote in his 'Reflections on the Past':

...I do not make it known sufficiently that I have no share in the work of the poor students' house. On the contrary I derive some satisfaction from it when people who know me only a little or not at all think I am a rich man who spends his fortune on these young people.⁴

Apropos of Claude's statement that he had no share in the work of the poor students' house, we are forced to enquire where then the support really came from? We have seen that Claude's students had benefited from the largesse of the great kitchen serving Louis le Grand. It is quite likely that the support received from the Jesuits went much further. Frs. Le Tellier and Megret would have been happy to back Claude's work as a counter action to the hostels for poor scholars being organised by the Gillotins of known Jansenist persuasion. Another possible source of income could have been the numerous votive offerings being made at the noted shrine of Our Lady at St. Victor's Abbey where Fr. Simon Gourdan was chaplain. Because of his solidarity with the Jesuits in their open stand against Jansenism he may have influenced some of his clientele to direct their charity towards Claude's dependants. It is on record that he was very closely associated with Fr. Martine who with Fr. Le Tellier had conducted the scripture department at Louis le Grand.

IN THE FIRING LINE

So far we have been considering the advantages for the community at rue des Cordiers of the improvement in their internal organisation and the clearer image being built up in the minds of the interested public about their identity. There were certain inconveniences attending this higher profile because of the circumstances of the time and the locality. Claude had deliberately played down their profile as a community and even as a seminary because he was only too conscious of certain hostile reefs on which their frail bark might suffer shipwreck. There were recurring examples of groups, even admirable charitable associations, coming to grief when surprised by the long tentacles of the 1666 Edict formally forbidding the foundation of any further religious communities within the realm without having previously secured the express royal approval.⁵ And such royal approval was not easily secured, to say the least, even in cases where the objective was to provide hospital facilities for the disabled. To be eligible to inherit a legacy or conduct legally binding financial arrangements, Claude's community would require a legally certified status. This was to become a critical issue later when

in order to benefit from a substantial legacy those who contested the right of the seminary to benefit from such a testament called for a clarification of the circumstances of the founding of the establishment in 1703.⁶ It was to be coyly argued on that occasion in their defence that it was not Claude's declared intention in 1703 to found a community in defiance of the law but to house the homeless, feed the hungry and clothe the naked and that there was no law against such. In a very real sense that was of the essence of Claude's activities, but it was also becoming more evident as time went on and the work took shape and increased in size, that there was at least a clear case for calling his work a seminary. As such it would escape the strictures of the 1666 Edict which specifically excluded seminaries from its detailed list. But it also made it quite clear that it was passing on the responsibilities for the recognition and control of such establishments to the bishops. In normal circumstances an application for recognition to the local bishop would be in order. But then it could be argued that neither Claude nor his seminary, nor the local bishop for that matter, could be described as 'normal'. Conditions in the ecclesiastical world in France at the time, especially in Paris, were rather abnormal because of the raging controversies connected with Jansenism, Gallicanism, Quietism etc. One particular facet of this state of ongoing controversy that affected Claude and his community was that the Jesuits were in the forefront of the battle against both Gallicanism and Jansenism, and as the Jesuits were the lifeline for the community at rue des Cordiers in matters material, academic and spiritual, there was bound to be some unpleasant consequences experienced; especially as the most virulent opposition to the Jesuits came from the Sorbonne across the street. The community of students at rue des Cordiers were on the Sorbonne side of the rue Saint-Jacques, in fact in the shadow of the Sorbonne church from late evening on, but by no means were they on the side of the Sorbonne in their on-going battle with the Jesuits if for no other reason than that they knew on what side their bread was buttered. No doubt they were well acquainted from their theology lectures with the burning controversy of the day, namely the celebrated '*Cas de Conscience*' involving the Pope's competence to pronounce on a matter of fact, viz. whether certain condemned propositions were in fact to be found in a particular book.

When Claude referred to his moral theology classes he used the designation 'Cases' as they must have spent much of the class discussing cases of conscience which were to be decided according to certain legal or theological principles. The controverted '*Cas de Conscience*' of 1701, which aroused such public controversy, asked the question as to whether absolution should be withheld from a penitent who was willing only to maintain a respectful silence about the Pope's competence in pronouncing on a matter of the factual existence of error in a document but not actually conceding the power of the pontiff to make such a decision. What aroused the heated controversy was that the propositions being condemned were those attributed to the founder of Jansenism and whereas there were many who rejected Jansenism some wanted to make this an occasion to signal their wish to limit the power of the Pope. Forty divines connected with the University of Paris favoured the Gallican limitation of the papal power to decide in such matters of fact. The Jesuits came out clear both against Jansenism and this latest manifestation of Gallicanism. The best known name among the Jesuits who went into print in this latest controversy where the Cardinal was being accused of being ambivalent in his approach to the Jansenists was Fr. Michael Le Tellier. He had been professor for twenty eight years at Louis le Grand before being appointed rector there. In these capacities he would have been very close to Claude and his community, especially as he had been director of the Aa at Louis le Grand while Claude



Top: Rue St-Jacques: Sorbonne facing Lycée le Grand

Middle: Lycée Louis le Grand

Bottom: Rue Cujas towards St. Etienne du Mont and Rue Rollin;
to right, the University Law School on the site of St. Etienne des Grés

was an active member. Another person close to Claude who took an active part in this controversy was Fr. Simon Gourdan of St. Victor's Abbey, former student of Louis le Grand. He publicly supported the Jesuits in their unambiguous stand and he upbraided his own community and the Cardinal archbishop for their failure to stand up and be counted on the side of orthodoxy at a time when Jansenism was using this issue to stage a come back.⁷

That Claude's community would be on the side of orthodoxy as expounded by his Jesuit mentors and his spiritual guide, Fr. Gourdan, is not to be wondered at. The seminary he was forming was in fact to be known down the years for its loyalty to the Holy See and its defence of orthodoxy, but at this stage no one would have bothered enquiring as to what views were held by this infant institution. The antagonism they were to encounter came rather from their rock solid adherence to the Jesuits. To appreciate fully then Claude's dilemma in seeking explicit official recognition for his seminary from Cardinal des Noailles, one has to take into account not merely the rumours current about his being too tolerant of Jansenistic positions but that in his capacity as archbishop he was provost of the Sorbonne and Navarre colleges and as such could be expected to insist that Claude like all other rectors of seminaries should see to it that his students attended the lectures given in the colleges approved by the University. Only colleges 'de plein exercice' had the right to opt out of this obligation. The students of Saint-Sulpice seminary founded 1642, for example, complied with this regulation; and this applied also to the special section of Saint-Sulpice opened later for poor students which was attended by Claude's near contemporaries at the Jesuit college in Rennes, Grignon de Montfort and his future biographer J.B. Blain. More relevant, the Gillotins – poor students paid for by special bursaries at nearby Collège Sainte-Barbe, attended the University colleges.

That Claude should opt out and send his students to the Jesuit college would have been looked on with disapproval at any time, but as the number of his students increased this was to become increasingly a matter of contention. And it was ironic that the Sorbonne should ever find itself at odds with a seminary founded specifically for poor students because the Sorbonne itself owed its origin to just such an initiative as Claude was now endeavouring to maintain against so many odds. Its founder, Robert de Sorbon (1206-1274) while attending the University in Paris had personally experienced the hardships of having to study and to support himself with whatever employment he could find. Later in life, when he had achieved success as writer, teacher and confessor to King Saint Louis, he was so conscious of this perennial plight of the poor student that he bought up a large section of rue Saint-Jacques and established a house of studies for poor students. The standard of theological teaching at this college soon became so renowned that it became the leading theological college of the University approved by the kings and popes. Naturally it was jealous of its inherited privileged position.

The main challengers to the University's monopoly in recent times had been the Jesuits. And this in its turn was rather ironic in that the founding fathers of the Society, including Ignatius himself, had studied at the various colleges of the University of Paris. Indeed the famed Jesuit system of education owed much to the University of Paris. But in the meantime the Jesuits had felt that they could and should operate their own third level college in Paris right in the heart of the Latin Quarter, mainly for their own clerical aspirants and for the students who had done their classical course under their direction. In the absence of regular seminaries, students opting for diocesan priesthood chose to continue their theological studies at the Jesuit college which had built up a high reputation. The standard of studies was of sufficiently known excellence that Rome had agreed to give it a licence to

grant degrees in theology and philosophy subject to the consent of the Parlement and the University. That this concession received the veto is understandable, perhaps, and it should have spelt the end of the appeal of Louis le Grand for students who aspired to positions of note in church or state. It meant that the battle was now on for students, considering the restricted intake of those days. The Sorbonne in particular felt itself under threat. The Jesuits had their feeder college at second level, so for a while the Sorbonne sought to conduct its own second level establishment; but they lacked the expertise and the tradition at this level.

Inevitably however the lure of degrees was tilting the score in favour of the Sorbonne. This was quite perceptible at the period when Claude was launching his initiative right on the doorstep of the Sorbonne. Now as the number of his students was on the increase, equalling almost the number of Jesuit scholastics, and thus helping Louis le Grand to maintain its image of full classrooms, Claude and his community were bound to come in for some criticism and be looked on with jaundiced eye. Knowing the precariousness of their prospects of survival as an institution in the absence of any stable endowment, and conscious no doubt of his own anomalous position as director when as yet he was but a simple cleric not yet having received even minor orders, he must have felt under increasing pressure. They were caught in the firing line between warring factions at a time when people felt obliged to take sides because of the fundamental theological positions involved. The students must have been affected by the tensions caused by this ongoing situation. The attitude of their peers, the clerical students who attended the Sorbonne and the other colleges approved by the University, may also have been a source of tension, especially as most of these students would have been from better off classes who could afford to pay the fees at their seminaries and for attendance at the lectures. The University colleges were not in the business of providing free lectures like the Jesuits. So the problems were building up for Claude's community in this area where their very success was becoming a source of irritation for others.

VACILLATING CARDINAL

As Cardinal de Noailles, the archbishop of Paris, was the authority designated in law to authorise the founding and conducting of seminaries within his diocese, one would expect that Claude would have approached him early on to seek official approval for his seminary. The fact that the products of his seminary were not specifically intended for the diocese of Paris would not have exempted them from diocesan control during their time of formation. The majority of the students attending the seminary of Saint-Sulpice were from the provinces but it had received diocesan approval. Such official approval was now all the more necessary as one of the first acts of Archbishop de Noailles on being transferred to Paris in 1696 was to legislate that all students approaching major orders must spend some fifteen months in one of the approved seminaries of the diocese.⁸ That Claude would have hesitated to describe his work as a seminary in the early days is understandable when numbers were so few and the organisation so sketchy. Above all, considering his own position as director of a seminary when he was not yet even in minor orders, such an application for recognition as a seminary might appear rather presumptuous to say the least. Time would come when he would have to make arrangements with the diocesan authorities for the students in line for promotion to major orders, but that was not an immediate prospect in the opening years.

There is no extant record of when exactly Claude did approach the archbishop

about matters connected with the conduct of his seminary. But that he was in contact with Archbishop de Noailles about the matter there is no doubt. It is alleged in subsequent documents that the Cardinal would have preferred that Claude would send his students to attend lectures at the Sorbonne of which he was the Provost instead of to the Jesuits with whom he was not on the best of terms. It is reported that Claude clearly explained to him that his purpose in gathering together these poor young men was to train them well to be willing to undertake ministries that were difficult and unrewarding and for which bishops were finding it impossible to find suitable candidates, and that the acquiring of university degrees would not merely be pointless but that it would tend to undermine their resolve to adhere to their specific vocation. Claude is said to have stated his case so well that the archbishop did not insist on his point about university attendance.⁹ It would appear that a number of serious attempts were made by those close to Cardinal des Noailles to get him suppress Claude's work, principally as an indirect attack on the Jesuits. When approached about the matter by Claude, the Cardinal reassured him using regularly the same words: "While God is being served there I will never destroy his work".¹⁰ Indeed the Cardinal must have been pleasantly reassured to find that the ideals which Claude was endeavouring to inculcate with such enlightened dedication were just the ones he had expounded in 1696 when addressing those approaching for tonsure. On that occasion he had severely criticised those who were approaching the sacred ministry with the mentality of looking for a well remunerated job instead of being motivated with the ideal of serving the flock of Christ. And on that occasion too, when sponsoring the cause of another seminary for poor students, he supported their claim for letters patent on the grounds that they were destined to fill such posts as Claude was now preparing his students for.

What was of vital importance for Claude was that the Cardinal did not insist on his sending the students to attend one of the approved seminaries when they applied for promotion to sacred orders. This derogation in their favour from his decree of 1696 making it obligatory for all such students to attend one of the approved seminaries, was tantamount to an approval of Claude's house in the matter of its standard of formation and studies. The standard of studies of course would have been tested by the diocesan examiners before the candidates were allowed to proceed for orders. As to the orthodoxy of the teaching in Claude's seminary, there was never to be any doubt. The same, however, could not be said about the archbishop, Cardinal de Noailles, and that was part of the problem for Claude as for his friend Fr. Simon Gourdan and others, most particularly the Jesuits.

It could be said that de Noailles owed his appointment to the see of Paris more to his closeness to royalty than to the depth of his theology. He was related by marriage to Mme de Maintenon, Louis XIV's second wife. It is said that she backed him for the post because of his friendship with Bossuet and to block Fénelon's chances of being transferred there from Cambrai. It was a time of intense religious controversy complicated by political intrigue, and de Noailles, due to his lack of intellectual acumen and power of decision, found himself time and again in the centre of unsolicited and unfavourable publicity. In his well meaning efforts to see that no injustice was done to those accused of Jansenist persuasion he was himself accused of being a Jansenist sympathiser.

Noailles is described as being an exceptionally good man in an age when sanctity in high places was rare. It was unfortunate then that the role he played in church affairs was particularly flawed. By way of explanation it was said of him by Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai:

He was a man of limited understanding and confused mind, and he was weak and soft-hearted. He said white to one and black to another. It was useless to seek his opinion for he had none.¹¹

Hard words but accepted as being accurate.

It was unfortunate then that he was called upon to intervene in the major and complicated disputes concerning Quietism and Jansenism at a time when the ongoing Gallican undercurrent forced the actors in this drama to perform on a stage made slippery by backstairs diplomacy at Versailles and at Rome. On one occasion when de Noailles found himself particularly badly bruised as he was caught between two contesting forces, he blamed the Jesuits in particular for having set him up. In revenge he withdrew from them permission to preach or hear confessions in his diocese. And when official notices unfavourable to him were posted on the walls of the archbishop's house by students from Saint-Sulpice seminary he called for these students to be expelled. In his efforts to extricate himself from situations that were mostly of his own making he often went back on his decisions with the result that he was referred to by the people as 'our back-sliding eminence' and in a popular song he was compared to a 'wag-of-the-wall clock'.¹²

All this must have been agonising for the Archbishop himself; it created serious problems for others, not least for people like Claude whose position was so precarious already. One can appreciate why he decided to nail his colours to the Jesuit mast and then try to steer clear of having his seminary too closely linked with the Archbishop. The decisions of the Archbishop at local level could impinge on the community at rue des Cordiers. When the pastor of their local parish, Saint-Benoit, died 1702 the successor appointed by the Archbishop, Fr. Guillaume Delamarre, was known to have been a signatory to the proscribed 'Cas de Conscience'. When belatedly the Cardinal issued his pronouncement against the 'Cas de Conscience' after being urged to do so by Bossuet, all the signatories in the region retracted except a member of Simon Gourdan's community. He opted instead for resigning his chair at the University. However, his replacement was immediately accused by the Jesuits of being Jansenist because of his close associations with the 'Gillotins', a seminary for poor students who attended the University for their lectures. Though these had the support of the Cardinal they were known to be deeply affected by Jansenism and had been used to block students from Louis le Grand being accommodated in the vacant rooms at Collège Saint-Barbe.¹³ In the trading of accusations and unfriendly compliments at the time, Claude's followers were referred to as the "Gillotins of the Jesuits". This emphasises that the perception in some circles of Claude's foundation was that it was actively supported by the Jesuits, led by Le Tellier, in order to counteract the "Gillotins". Later, when that link with the Jesuits became more widely known and disliked, a writer could express himself in such terms as: 'He who says Placists (followers of des Places, that is) says worse than a Jesuit if it is possible to have such a thing'.¹⁴

TIME TO MOVE

The anti-Jesuit factions were persistent and powerful. The University in particular, could and did put pressure on colleges and hostels to avoid co-operating in any way with the Jesuits or availing of their services. The Irish College had experience of such pressure, and though they did not allow themselves to be involved in any of the periodical outbursts against the society, remembering of course, how much they owed to their generous help over the years, yet they had to bow to pressure

from the University when they were ordered to cancel their invitation to a Jesuit to speak at their official celebrations on St Patrick's Day.¹⁵

The Jesuits were a tough institution who seemed to thrive on confrontation. Claude's infant society was far more vulnerable and as they were more exposed to these animosities in their present location, right in the firing line as it were between Louis le Grand and the Sorbonne, Claude began to have some misgivings about their location which had at first seemed ideal. There were other considerations, this time from inside their own house, that made Claude begin to envision a change of residence sooner rather than later.

The arrival of Fr. Le Barbier had done much to give the community at rue des Cordiers a centre around which things held together and began to thrive. As its reputation had spread, naturally the numbers wanting to join them increased. This was certainly good news, but it put a strain on resources. Above all it taxed the available accommodation at the Gros Chapelet. That in itself need not have caused too much worry as there was always the possibility of renting further rooms in the adjacent hostel, the Rose Blanche, once rooms became vacant again at the close of the scholastic year. Rooms would then be re-allocated and the management would be more than glad at the prospect of housing further 'poor students' as they were no problem from the point of view of discipline. The same, however, could not be said of all the other students being accommodated there. Even though they were attending lectures at Louis le Grand and were in principle under the supervision of prefects, they were in no mood for leading the cloistered life of monks or seminarians. The further from the centre the looser discipline tended to become. That this was no new problem in this particular hostel is evident from the records of a previous generation. In fact what was happening to Claude's students was but history repeating itself. The founders of the Foreign Missions Society, the original members of the *Assemblée des Amis*, (Société des Bons Amis) who were lodged at the Rose Blanche, found that in order to get out of earshot of the unedifying conversations of some of the other students, they had to seek refuge in the private room of one of the overseers.¹⁶

When Claude's students had to run the gauntlet with the other boarders as they passed through the premises with the 'left-overs' from the Jesuits' kitchen, they may have had to cope not merely with rude stares but also with unhelpful comments. Reading between the lines of one of the early students, Jean Faulconnier, in the testimony he left in later years, we can gather that there were such problems:

In the early days he (Claude) stressed frequently that he highly valued being despised; he spoke of this in a manner so full of the love of God that he made light of the humiliations he had to suffer in those days.¹⁷

As the main source of animosity in the locality was the Sorbonne which was bent on keeping up the pressure against their competitor, Louis le Grand, one wonders whether the attitude of the authorities affected the students in their relations with their poorer neighbours. Another source of distraction and exposure would have been the constant calling of carriages with the very well-off day students attending the secondary school at Louis le Grand and again the visitors for the students at second and third level who were boarding at the college and at the hostels. The clash between the poverty of the life and dress of Claude's community and this display of wealth and social status must have been an added factor in influencing Claude to think seriously about moving away to more secluded as well as less cramped quarters. By nature and education he had known the value

of being discreet, so he would not have shared his worries in this matter with the students as that could so easily unsettle those whose great problem before joining his community was their sense of insecurity. But come the summer recess, when there was more time and less pressure, one of his priorities was to scour the area in search of such a location. He would have to secure a deal that was within his financial budget, such as it was, a building where all of the present students could be conveniently accommodated with room for expansion, but a primary consideration would be that they be not too far removed from Louis le Grand as that was still their lifeline for lectures, for spiritual guidance and for material sustenance.

MINOR ORDERS AND A NOBLE WEDDING

In the meantime Claude had his own personal life to plan. 1705 was to see two milestones passed in his own story and that of his family. Early in June, Claude was promoted to minor orders in Paris and two days later in Rennes his sister, Jeanne-Françoise, was married.

Till now Claude had no particular clerical status. Having received tonsure 15 August 1702 he was entitled to wear the clerical garb or *soutane* and would normally be in line the following year for promotion to minor orders, the first of a series of steps to the altar in those days. Though all these minor orders were usually conferred at the same ceremony by Claude's time, the prayers for each 'ordination' deputed the candidate for a particular official function in the church's liturgy in the earlier centuries, namely Porter, Lector, Acolyte and Exorcist. Apart from the canonical spaced delays on the road to the priesthood it was not infrequent that some candidates postponed their advancement out of feelings of humility and respect for the office of priesthood. Claude would have been very conscious that Michael Le Nobletz adopted that approach. Claude's own delay may well be explained, however, by his full-time commitment to the work of the seminary and perhaps in order to advance in the company of some of the students. The arrival of Fr. Le Barbier had enabled him to concentrate more on his own preparations in the matter of attention to studies, etc. One formality that had to be attended to was the application to the bishop of his diocese of origin for dismissorial letters which would ensure that there were no objections to his promotion to orders. The dismissorial letters were duly granted allowing him to be ordained in Paris.¹⁸ That the ordination ceremony took place 6 June, the feast of St. Claude, may have just been arranged to suit the diary of the ordaining prelate but it is far more likely that this date was specially chosen by both the Jesuits and the bishop as a personal appreciation for Claude whose work and special charism were now being valued so highly in certain quarters.

The bishop who was asked specially by the Jesuits to perform the ordinations in Paris in 1705 was Henri de Thiard, formerly bishop of Toul but promoted in 1704 to succeed Bossuet as Archbishop of Meaux. He was later to be created cardinal and known thereafter as Cardinal de Bissy. Though not gifted with the intellectual brilliance nor the oratorical prowess of Bossuet, he was an excellent administrator, a zealous pastor, a defender of orthodoxy as against the contagion of Jansenism. He was above all a staunch supporter of the Holy See as against the prevalent ultra-Gallicanism of the day. All this and much more made him very acceptable to the Jesuits of whom he was in turn keenly supportive, and from this ordination ceremony till his death in 1737 he was to be a generous supporter of Claude and his community. We shall have occasion to mention Cardinal de Bissy in connection with his support for the seminary and its claim for legal recognition when this was

opposed both by the Jansenists and the University. Soon afterwards he handed over the direction of his diocesan seminaries, Junior and Senior to the directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

One consequence of the choice of this date for Claude's promotion to minor orders was that it ruled out all possibility of his being able to attend the wedding ceremony in Rennes of his sister Jeanne-Françoise.

It is so long now since the members of Claude's family have been mentioned in this narrative as having any impact on his life that one may be justified in concluding that he had taken very literally Grignon de Montfort's advice to clerical students of his time namely: 'Go out from your father's house and your own kindred..'. There is no evidence that he had revisited Rennes in the intervening years. We have seen that he was involved from the start in Paris with his various charitable undertakings. A throw away remark in an Aa report informs us that they were almost as busily occupied with their various works during the holidays as during the school year. So there was little time in Claude's calendar of events for the prolonged absence that a sojourn in Rennes would require in those days. The journey alone by coach (75 leagues) would take a minimum of five days each way. The expense of such a prolonged trip with stops at several inns had to be taken into account by all except those like Grignon de Montfort who had to foot it and beg his way for all the ten days it took him to get to Paris in 1692/3.²⁰

It is more than likely anyhow that Claude had definitely made up his mind to make a clear break with his family. By now he was totally committed to his undertaking and he knew his family had also to reorient their life and plans to fit in with the new situation where they could no longer seriously take him into consideration when it came to planning the future of their vast undertakings. All had by now concentrated on preparing his young sister, Jeanne-Françoise, to take on that role. She had been pursuing her studies at the school conducted by the Ursuline sisters and was being gradually initiated into the family business and finances.

Claude had written in retreat notes in 1701:

How would you reconcile your solitude (as a cloistered monk, that is) with the affection you have for your sister? You love her tenderly and you cannot bear to be separated from her for any length of time. She is not settled in life and she is so dear to you that you want to take an interest in her welfare...²¹

As Claude did not embrace the life of a Carthusian on leaving home we can well imagine that his interest in the welfare of his sister did not end with their being separated. They must have been in correspondence over the years and though their lifestyle and interests would have by now been poles apart it is to be presumed that because of the proximity of their ages and their closeness over the years, Jeanne could be counted on as being more understanding of his idealism and self sacrifice than his parents who had been so conditioned to look to him as the justification of their life of endless acquisition and social climbing. How highly the historian would value the discovery of such personal correspondence in the effort to look more deeply into the human heart of Claude at this period, but it would appear certain that the ravages of fire and the upsets caused by revolutions have deprived us of having access to any such personal documents. In the great fire which decimated a large portion of Rennes in December 1720, the des Places mansion and extensive business premises off rue de la Cordonnerie perished and we have a definite legal entry which states that among the valuables which perished were the family papers.²²

Certain legal documents about the marriage of Jeanne-Françoise to Conseiller Henri Le Chat have happily survived and were traced at the beginning of this century in time to be included in the major biography by Père Henri Le Floch. From these we learn that the wedding took place in the parish church of Saint-Etienne, this being the parish which included rue de la Cordonnerie where M.des Places had built his spacious town house to his own requirements. Money was no object and it was conveniently sited across the street from his official quarters in the Hôtel des Monnaies. The church of Saint-Etienne escaped the disastrous fire unlike Saint-Sauveur which had its miraculous statue of Our Lady which was reputed to have saved Rennes on a former occasion. From the marriage entry and from the published bans we learn some details about Jeanne's husband, Henri Le Chat. He is given in the marriage contract as Chevalier M. Henri Le Chat, Seigneur de Vernée, Marigné, Tescout, Chanteussé et autres, and Conseiller au parlement de Bretagne. His main residence was their chateau at Vernée near Angers but as well, for his attendances at parlement, he had a town house at Rennes at rue basse Baudrairie some few minutes walk from where Jeanne Françoise was born when the family lived in a house leased to them by the Franciscans.²³

So M.des Places' son in law was of genuine noble status as attested by his titles and his being a conseiller of the parlement of Brittany. This we can appreciate meant so much to M.des Places who had suffered the traumatic disappointment of seeing the whole thrust of his well-laid schemes to restore the family's title to nobility brought to nought when Claude, instead of falling in with his parents' wishes, had opted not merely for the priesthood but for a form of priesthood which ruled out all prospects of being promoted to higher ranks in the church. Now that his daughter was joined in marriage with a family of securely established noble status he could feel that his life work had not really been in vain as it was no doubt in some measure due to his being Juge-Garde de la Monnaie and as owner of a vast amount of property that his daughter's hand had been sought in matrimony by this noble lord of many manors. That Henri Le Chat was seemingly a man of property also need not have over excited M.des Places who had been doing deals in property all his life; he could match pound for pound with the wealthiest and he was about to do just that in the dowry he was giving his daughter. The details of that dowry spelt out in glittering gold and silver in the dusty legal document make us gasp even at this remove. Apart from all the houses and lands she was one day to inherit as the sole heir, she was to receive 100,000 pounds as well as her trousseau and some ten thousand pounds worth of silverware and furniture. As well it seems from the arcane diction of this complicated legal document that Jeanne's parents were binding themselves to provide house, servants and carriage for the newly married couple for up to five years or 2,000 pounds each semestre instead.²⁴ This last detail gives us some idea of the value of money in that age. Claude, if he were present and able to hold his breath, might have calculated the fortune being handed over in terms of his knowledge that it cost students of sufficient means, 400 pounds a year for their annual keep at the premier seminary in France, namely Saint-Sulpice.

Naturally Claude's absence from this big family occasion must have been felt, but Jeanne had at least the blessing of having both her parents still alive and close at hand. Claude would be present at the baptism of her son but just now he was deeply committed to the welfare of his new and extended family. Some of his problems might be easily solved if he had at his disposal a fraction of the inheritance that was to pass to his sister, but any such proposition was very far from his mind as he was to let his family know when next he was to meet them in Rennes.

ON THE MOVE

By the close of the academic year in 1705 Claude may have come to the conclusion that he must soon make a decision about securing an alternative site for his seminary. He would, of course, have to consult the Jesuit authorities and he would be guided by their advice. He most likely had to depend on them not merely for financial advice but perhaps for some financial guarantees. They knew his legal expertise and trusted his judgement but there were limits as to what financial commitment they could afford to underwrite.

In the absence of any hard facts one has to try to imagine how Claude spent that summer making discreet enquiries throughout the Latin Quarter. There were places vacant in several of the hostel type colleges for students attending the university lectures and some directors of projects for assisting poor students had availed themselves of these economic opportunities. This had the disadvantage that it was impossible to form such scattered groups into one community and such a community spirit was an essential part of Claude's project. The only reference by his early biographers to his preoccupations and plans at this period is the brief statement by Besnard:

The progress made in every line of endeavour by his first disciples was too remarkable not to attract other excellent candidates to him. Consequently, he decided to rent a house for them in which they would be less cramped for space.²⁵

The first document referring to this new site for his community of students is the lease signed by him, 17 October 1705, and one Claude de Cornailles empowering Claude to take possession of a property in rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne after the Christmas recess that year. This move would hopefully allow the community to organise their life and activities with more privacy and scope. Above all it would give Claude the conditions he needed in order to draft the rules and regulations and put on paper the ideals which were to provide the solid framework for his seminary which was to enable it to survive some traumatic events ahead.

This change of location and the new orientation to be given to the work coincided with the ordination of the first student of the seminary, Jean Le Roy, and the arrival of a student who had already been ordained subdeacon, namely James-Hyacinth Garnier, a native of Janzé some few miles from Rennes. Very soon after his arrival Garnier was made an associate of the community. This may have been due to the fact that he was already in major orders and that he was 22 years of age but also, one suspects, because he arrived with impeccable credentials. He seems to have been closely associated with the family of Fr. Michael Le Barbier and may also have been very well known over the years to Claude's mother's people, the Le Menuests of Fougères.²⁶

By the end of 1705 Claude must have felt that events were unfolding in their favour under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that the time was ripe for a new beginning in the relative isolation of rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne which still left them within ten minutes walk of Collège Louis-le-Grand.

A Caring Community

RUE ROLLIN

The area into which the seminary now moved was known as Place Maubert. The street, which was then known as rue Neuve Saint-Étienne, is today known as rue Rollin, renamed after the tenant who succeeded them at no 8, namely Charles Rollin (1661-1741), former Provost of the Sorbonne and a well known writer on education and history. Not merely does the street owe its name to Rollin but the continued existence of the principal section of the building which housed the seminary is due to a preservation order in favour of this popular humanist.¹

The street itself is not very imposing. Today it is just a quiet backwater with little signs of activity as it is really a cul-de-sac so far as vehicles are concerned; pedestrians have access to rue Monge by way of a steep stairs of stone steps. This brings one on to the level of the nearby Lutèce Arène, the centre of ancient Roman occupation in the Paris area. So in those far off days rue Neuve Saint-Etienne must have been at the centre of things. In Claude's time they were surrounded by properties owned by various religious communities, principally the Fathers of Christian Doctrine and the (English) Daughters of Saint Augustine. In spite of the title *Anglaise* it would appear that there were some Irish girls associated with the place, among them Ms Morphy, royal mistress.

From time to time certain celebrities found it convenient to reside in this quiet connecting street off the beaten track but near enough to the centre of the city and the Latin Quarter. Blaise Pascal, whom we have already met at rue des Cordiers when he was at work on *Les Provinciales*, ended his days here. The principal celebrity who would have interested Claude and his students, namely the philosopher René Descartes, is today commemorated by a plaque recalling his various sojourns. From this plaque, erected 1987, we learn:

'Here lived René Descartes (1596-1650). He resided in this house during his stay in Paris during 1644, 1647 & 1648. His attitude to life is encapsulated in this quotation from a letter he wrote here 1648 to Princess Elisabeth de Bohême. "Living as I am with one foot in one country and the other in another...I am very content with my condition in that it is free"'.

That was over a half century earlier but Claude was well acquainted with not merely the philosopher's ideas but also with his immediate relatives: he had been taught by the philosopher's nephew, Fr. Philippe Descartes, SJ, and he had known the branch of the family who had lived beside the des Places' residence in rue de la Cordonnerie in Rennes. The students also would be familiar with Descartes from their lectures on philosophy and would have been informed by the Jesuit teachers at Louis le Grand about his connection with the street where they now lived.

The area through which the students would now have to pass several times a day on their way to and from lectures was closely associated with the patroness of Paris, Saint-Genéviève. They passed along by Abbaye Saint-Geneviève where her famous tomb was the centre of veneration and pilgrimage. Today whatever remains of her shrine after the destruction of the abbey during the Revolution, are preserved and honoured in the exquisite church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont nearby. That whole area was studded with colleges of various sorts where students

preparing for the priesthood attended lectures at the centres controlled by the University of Paris. Once again Claude's community would have it brought home very clearly to them that they were exceptional in the matter of not attending the institutions linked with the University.

The lease for the use of the new site in rue Rollin was signed 17 October 1705. The owner, Claude de Cornailles, retained for himself possession of the upper floors of the three storey portion which remains standing today in lonely isolation, something like a Norman castle with the stress on height rather than width. The ground floor of this part of the premises was ceded to Claude for his own personal use as the principal person in charge of the rented property and readily accessible to the landlord who had worked out the details of the lease with specific instructions which were legally enforceable. One of the details was that no other person was to sleep in this section of the building apart from Claude.

The main portion of the premises was a long two storey building running the full length of the property on the inner side of the spacious courtyard and parallel with rue Rollin. At the rear of this building were the gardens of the Fathers of the Christian Doctrine and the Augustinian Sisters. Mentioned in the lease were a stable, coach house, poultry house and a well. A well in the property was of vital importance in those days before piped water was available. The poultry house had also its practical importance, but the stable and coachhouse being redundant were soon converted to more urgent uses. It was to be expected that the use of these premises for the requirements of a seminary would call for certain modifications and Claude had seen to it that these were catered for in the lease he had worked out with de Cornailles.²

The actual entry into possession was arranged to take place during the Christmas recess and work went ahead immediately on the alterations to convert all available accommodation into rooms suited to their requirements. One of the clauses of the lease enjoined that Claude should have the rooms adequately furnished so as to ensure the safety and well-being of the occupants. French law was relatively advanced in such requirements. In rule No 254 of the seminary, we see that each student was to have as well as a bed, a trunk to store his personal belongings. Then there were the chairs, stools, desks etc.; so there must have been a major operation in transportation during this move from rue des Cordiers to their new premises. And one can be sure it was the students themselves who did this work and not any hired removal firm. But as to where these articles of furniture came from, and where Claude got the necessary finance, we have little information. We can but admire his expertise in such practical matters and later we shall have an opportunity to see how he transmits that practical sense and care for detail into the written rule governing the smooth running of the community's affairs. Economies were to be achieved not at the cost of cutting down on essentials but in ensuring that those in charge of the various functions were alert and provident in their dealings (Nos 156ff).

A first consideration would have been the providing of a suitable oratory. A large room was required to cater for the seventy or so which was by now the grand total after but three years. The floor of bare flagstones was retained as we learn from the rule which required the students to kneel on those flagstones rather than on the step at the altar rails out of reverence for the Lord. The altar itself, in keeping with current liturgical requirements, was placed on a dais reached by three steps.

While these alterations were in progress the students, and Claude among them, could be seen ferrying planks, lime etc. through the streets of Paris on

their way from a depot along the quays. Fr. Thomas, who was a student at the time, mentions this exercise in his sole reference to life in rue Rollin, merely by way of an illustration of the spirit Claude inculcated by word and example:

He was often seen carrying home what he had bought, both in order to save something for the benefit of his students and in order to humble himself. He was delighted when some one who knew him encountered him as he was carrying his load of bundles, because he rejoiced in meeting with such humiliations.

Furthermore he welcomed these embarrassing experiences out of the best motives in a perfect spirit of humility. He often expounded those motives to his poor students and urged them not only to bear such humiliations with courage but to seek after them eagerly. He succeeded in convincing them. His words, and still more his examples, made them conquer the embarrassment and timidity that is so natural to youth. They became ashamed only of offences against God and of cowardice.

A holy imprudence prompted them to do the most humiliating things as soon as it was commanded by the rule or demanded by the needs of the community. They vied with one another in such humiliations. For instance, everyone took care of sweeping the street on weekdays. Bringing water from the fountain in full daylight, transporting planks and lime from a place north of the port, etc., were the less degrading among the activities they engaged in.³

As Fr. Thomas had earlier remarked, while the students were at rue des Cordiers they were hidden away and lost to the sight of the public, that had the disadvantage that few were moved to help with their charitable donations. Now matters had changed. They were much more in the public eye whether en route to and from class or on those servile errands where they must have excited some interest as they carried their loads while presumably some were dressed in their clerical attire. Helpful as this publicity might be in the long run, the aspect of life at rue Rollin most appreciated just then was the relative peace and isolation provided – in fact the advantages of a rural setting almost in the centre of the city. And this was exactly how Charles Rollin viewed the advantages of this oasis of peace when he came to live there after the seminary had moved elsewhere. He was to write of this property to a friend:

I have begun to experience and to love more than ever the sweet joys of rustic life since I have here a small garden which serves as my country residence. I have not of course the long alleys of trees reaching to the horizon; just two small ones, one of which provides a bower that is adequate for my needs and the other which is open to the midday sun allows me to enjoy the sunshine for a good part of the day and promises to provide plenty of fruit for the season. A small trellis supports five apricot trees and ten peach trees: that is the sum total of my fruit trees. I have no beehives but I have the pleasure every day of seeing the bees flitting over the blossoms of my trees, preoccupied with their prey, enriching themselves with nectar and doing no wrong...⁴

Over the door leading into the room where Claude worked and composed his rule, there is a plaque displaying a quotation not from Claude but from his successor, Rollin, where he expressed in Latin his sentiments with regard to the house: 'Most beloved house, thanks to which I live in the country and in the city, I enjoy peace with myself and with God'.

One can be sure that for Claude also the object of all his planning and labour



Rue Rollin with Seminary
located to right



Relict of the building occupied by students



Claude occupied the ground floor of this house; note Rollin plaque over doorway

was that he should provide not merely a house but a haven where his community could try to be at peace with nature, with one another and with God. This ideal is stamped on the rule he was now drafting. It is obvious, that in spite of the dry itemised style of composition, using the minimum of words, that the aim was not to produce a mere regulation to be interpreted legalistically but a statement of what was in the best interest of all concerned as individuals, as functionaries and as a community. Rule no 24 simply states: 'All shall do their very best to adhere strictly to all the general and particular rules'. In order that all might have a clear picture of the over all plan, he saw to it that these rules were read in public every two months. It was on these occasions that he had the opportunity to stress the spirit animating these rules made for the common good. Even while reading the rules as they are in all their prosaic simplicity one is conscious not merely of Claude's grasp of detail but that even while dealing with the necessary nuts and bolts as it were, his humanity and spirituality shine clearly, thus providing the values that make life worth the sacrifice.

The portion of the building where Claude lived and worked was distanced somewhat from the main building where the community lived. Unfortunately that main building is no longer standing though until relatively recent times it had housed a succession of educational establishments. And though it was not part of Claude's purpose to give us a picture of that building we can learn something about its layout from what he prescribes for the smooth regulation of life within the house. As we have references to the chapel, the library, the kitchen and related stores, the recreation room, the porter's office and reception room which still exist today, we can form a good general image of the layout and certain aspects of the life as lived in this fully fledged seminary. We are in fact looking in on the type of establishment which for many years to come was to be the norm in the Catholic church for houses of formation of students for the priesthood as visualised by the fathers of the Council of Trent. This was a style of life which owed much to a monastic model based on regularity, silence, long periods of study and prayer as well as some efforts to provide a practical training in the pastoral skills they would be called on to exercise in their ministry.

As we peruse the 263 articles of the rule composed by Claude, the original manuscript of which has happily survived, we can question it for two answers: What manner of life was lived in seminaries in France at the time and what does this document tell us of the man who composed it? While we ponder the type of priestly formation Claude strove to impart to these seventy young men it is not superfluous to remind ourselves again at this stage that Claude was not yet a priest himself, that while he is so obviously concerned about the material, academic and spiritual welfare of these young men, he had to arrange all about his own promotion to major orders. And there is nothing that will bring all this home better to us than to follow him as he goes back home to Rennes, come the summer recess of 1706, in order to make contact once more with his family and to settle some necessary requirements with the diocesan authorities about his own clerical status.

RENNES REVISITED

There is no evidence that Claude had ever gone back to Rennes since he had left for Paris late September 1701. And though we have no definite proof that he did not return home in the meantime it is in keeping with what we know of him that his plans and preoccupations in the intervening years almost precluded him from returning to the life he had so definitely cut himself off from. His close association

with the Jesuits and his subsequent identification with the poor students had deeply altered his affiliations. These five years then had greatly altered Claude; they had also greatly changed the family situation at Rennes.

Firstly we recall that in a sense the des Places home had revolved around Claude. His mental and physical development were fondly watched over by his doting parents as they had based all their hopes on him. His sister Jeanne-Françoise took very much second place. She was cherished by all, of course, and particularly by Claude himself, but her age and her sex put her on the periphery of the family prospects.

In the intervening years Jeanne-Françoise had not merely grown up and stepped into Claude's shoes; she had already been settled in life having married and left the home.⁵ She was now living at her chateau at Vernée near Angers and though she was back at Rennes whenever her husband's duties at the Parlement required his presence there, her home and her interests were now firmly rooted elsewhere. So the house Claude came home to in Rennes must have not resembled home for him as he knew it.

The family had for some years been living in their new spacious residence at the corner of rue Saint-Guillaume and rue de la Cordonnerie. This residence was meant to be the centre from where their large business interests could be managed from close at hand as all the business premises built up over the years were on the same compound. All had been so arranged that Mr des Places could also attend to his duties as Juge-Garde at the Mint offices across the way. Naturally it was hoped that this hereditary post would have passed on to Claude with all its trappings of noble status, apart from other titles in that line which would have by now come Claude's way had he opted for life as conseiller.

By now all those schemes must have sounded very hollow. Mr des Places' health had not improved. It had been already a source of some worry to Claude before he left home and we see from a letter by a business partner the following year that this was a worry for others too. He may well by now have delegated his duties at the Mint to his partner, Gilles Serpin Sr de la Richardière, if he had not parted altogether with that office. One can imagine that their business interests also had been somewhat wound down and conducted mainly through trusted employees. There is one area, however, where Mr des Places is on record as having taken on a more active role and that was as a member of the men's sodality of Our Lady conducted in Claude's alma mater, the Jesuit college of St Thomas. He may have felt he was now somehow part of the Jesuit extended family as a result of Claude's close association with the Jesuits in his work and way of life.

It was a great consolation to Claude no doubt, that he found his mother still healthy and active. She had also the company and the help of their cousin, Anne-Marie Lamisse du Hingueul who had been adopted by the des Places family. She had remained on and her presence must have softened the blow for Claude's parents as they saw their spacious home was so silent and empty. It would appear that Mme des Places had kept up her charitable social work, especially among the poor. Indeed she was to leave part of her extensive possessions to provide a home for the poor.

One walk we can imagine Claude taking with his mother was to the cemetery at St. Peter's at St. George, to visit the grave of his sister, Jeanne-Claude. She had died at the age of 5 months.

Having lavishly provided for their only surviving daughter, who was by now comfortably settled, the des Places parents wanted to make sure that Claude was also adequately provided for even if they had not originally given their blessing to his particular choice of vocation. At first this disapproval may have been reflected,

as Fr. Thomas suggests, in the non-too-generous annual allowance of 800 livres made in his favour by his father to cover his keep and his studies at Louis le Grand. But once Claude had definitely opted for the priesthood it would appear that Mr des Places set about seeing to it that he would have a guaranteed income for life in the form of a substantial church benefice. In the official report made out by the Assemblée des Amis for 1702/3 we saw that Claude had been described as having refused a benefice of 4000 livres.⁶ No further details are given as to who was responsible for this arrangement. What is abundantly clear from the report was that Claude had firmly opted for lady poverty as his bride. He had solemnised that commitment by a vow of poverty as we learned from Fr. Clorivière's biographical notice. His fidelity to that commitment was now going to be demonstrated anew, much to the annoyance of his father who had quietly been at work to make what he considered proper provision for his son at a standard befitting his origins.

The Council of Trent had prescribed that no cleric was to be promoted to sacred orders until he had been assured of a guaranteed minimum source of income – a *titulus clericalis* as it was canonically described. This was to eliminate the abuse of mendicant clerics whose support became a burden for the Christian community. As Claude was now about to approach the diocesan authorities in Rennes for his official 'letters of freedom' he would have to produce convincing evidence of a guaranteed minimum source of livelihood, his *titulus clericalis*, that is. The minimum figure specified by diocesan regulation in Rennes was 60 livres and that was the amount Claude was going to settle for, the *titulus* of the very poor, no matter what others might try to decide on his behalf. For that *titulus* he was going to turn to his family. He knew that it would give great satisfaction to his family to be asked to provide that favour. He was not for accepting a church benefice as that would oblige him in conscience to provide the pastoral care involved and it could limit his freedom for the work to which he was already committed.⁷

Once again dusty and forgotten legal documents unearthed by the indefatigable Père Michel have let us in on a personal detail in the life of Claude. He had come to Rennes with an interesting document bearing two signatures, his own and one Francis Lucas de Saint Macau who had already been persuaded by a third party, presumably on having been handsomely remunerated, to forego his title to three benefices at the court of Rome valued at 1,800 livres annually! These benefices had been made over to Claude for his material use, but he was now making it clear that he was not accepting this offer and that he was giving Francis Lucas de Saint Macau full freedom to dispose of these benefices as he wished. The signed document, dated 17 July 1706, was to be lodged at the offices of a legal notary with instructions that its contents be brought to the notice of a third interested party. It was officially registered at a later date, 25 August 1706, and it is to be taken for granted that the third interested party to whom it had been delivered was Claude's father who had with the best intentions made that secret deal in his favour. Now he was to be asked instead to do another deal in Claude's favour before that document releasing Lucas de Saint Macau from his obligations could be legally binding on all parties. As Claude was insisting on accepting only the minimum 60 livres which had to be guaranteed for life, it was arranged that part of the annual rent for one of the properties owned by des Places be assigned by law in Claude's favour. Once again the legal documents from a notary's office preserved in the municipal archives let us in on a simple but touching family ceremony.

One of the many properties acquired by Mr des Places during his years of intensive legal practice was a mansion of some size and amenities that won for it the imposing name of Noble Maison de Mottais. It had come on the market in 1686 due to a bankruptcy case and Mr des Places, having the ready cash at

his disposal, made his successful bid. That property was to remain in the des Places' possession for the next hundred years.⁸ Their possession, however, was disputed by the original owner after the passage of a certain number of years. That latter detail need not have any interest for us at this remove had not Père Michel discovered that in the legal battles about the ownership, one of the opposing legal men employed was the father of Rev. John Baptist Blain, contemporary of Claude and of Grignon de Montfort. It had puzzled some readers of Blain's biography of Grignon de Montfort why he had so sedulously avoided all mention of Claude and why he made a seemingly ungenerous passing reference to him and his seminary in the biography he wrote of Saint John Baptist De La Salle. Perhaps the Noble Maison de Mottais may have been to blame! Claude of course was never to know any thing of this legal tussle which happened after his death, nor was he to be the owner of this property at any stage. He was just entitled to receive 60 livres of its rent annually. And in order to qualify legally for this annuity he had to go along to the mansion, which was situated in the parish of Saint Lorent on the outskirts of Rennes. There in the company of his parents and the inevitable legal representative, he had to go through certain symbolic procedures of testing this and operating that.. as required by property laws at the time. The document describing all this procedure has survived giving us an opportunity to look in at some aspects of life in France at that period. Above all this dry legal document affords us the opportunity of eavesdropping on a scene in the des Places family in Rennes, the last such, in fact, that there is to recount. And, significantly, the document was officially signed and deposited, 23 August 1706, in the office of Mr Le Barbier, Mr des Places' trusted legal partner and parent of Fr. Michael Vincent who was Claude's indispensable colleague in running the seminary at rue Rollin in Paris.⁹

One can well sympathise with Mr des Places who is reported by Fr. Thomas as not at all approving of the degree of virtue being practised by his son. But as Fr. Thomas had stressed, Claude taught not merely by word but by example. When he put the highest ideals of evangelical poverty before his students and tried to influence them to be ready to accept the lowest paid posts in the ministry, he could do that more convincingly when he was known not to have made any exception in his own case just because his family could afford to come to his assistance. Finally in not accepting the generous benefices secured for him by his family he was but following once again the example given by his admired model, Fr. Michael Le Nobletz: he is on record as having twice turned down such offers and having so offended his parents that they turned him out and disowned him calling him in Breton *ar belec fol*, the foolish priest!¹⁰

There is no extant reference to Claude's having met his sister at Rennes, but as she had given birth to her first baby, 7 June 1706, it can be taken for granted that Claude would have seen both mother and child, either at Rennes or Angers. It would have been a very happy occasion for all. Sadly it would have been a case of *Ave atque Vale* as the baby, Louise-Françoise, like Claude's eldest sister, was to be short lived: she died 23 August 1707, two weeks after the birth of her brother and just as Claude was expected to arrive from Paris to assist at his baptism.

TOWARDS ORDINATION

Back in rue Rollin after his five day trek by coach, Claude had much to occupy him for the rest of the summer recess. One presumes that either Jean Le Roy or Michael Le Barbier had been holding the fort in his absence. The holidays were always the time when repairs and modifications had to be attended to. There were

the applications from prospective students to be processed. Above all the budget for the year ahead had to be planned and in the absence of any fixed income that surely must have presented problems as they envisaged providing for the needs of seventy young men. Claude had at least one worry less: having at last settled the matter of his *titulus clericalis* he could look forward to being promoted to major orders at the next ordinations which were scheduled for Quarter Tense in Advent. So on 16 December 1706 Claude made his first firm commitment on the way to the priesthood: apart from the major order itself which would now involve him more closely in the liturgy, especially in the matter of acting as subdeacon in solemn high masses, there was also implicit in this ceremony a public commitment to celibacy for life.

Normally there was an interval of one year before the reception of the next major order, the diaconate, but as Claude's case-history was special in that he had deferred his advancement to the priesthood in the interests of total commitment to the work of the seminary, he was now easily dispensed from the normal delay. The dimissorial letters issued at Rennes, 2 February 1707, made allowance for the required interval to be waived if so required. Claude then was free to advance to the diaconate at Quarter Tense in Lent, which in that year fell on 19 March, the feast of St Joseph.¹¹ Again there were certain functions in the liturgy which a deacon could perform, some by ordinary right and some by delegation in extraordinary cases such as preaching on public occasions, the distribution of Holy Communion and the administering of solemn baptism. One can imagine that Claude was called on to act as Deacon for solemn High Mass not merely at his own seminary but at an early opportunity at Collège Louis-le-Grand and at the church of Saint-Étienne des Grés. There were, incidentally, those clerics who remained as deacons for a prolonged period, or even for life, out of humility and reverence for the priesthood. Michel Le Nobletz and the noted founder of seminaries for the poor, Francis Chansiergues, delayed their advancement to the altar out of such motives. Claude, though deeply immersed in the material and spiritual aspects of the conduct of the seminary, felt that he could give the required attention to his studies and make the other preparations for advancement to ordination in December of that year. He had the cooperation of the two ordained members, Frs Le Roy and Le Barbier, and though normally it was required in the diocese of Paris that those approaching ordination should attend the special courses in pastoral preparation being given in the approved seminaries – Saint Sulpice, St Nicolas du Chardonnet etc., no such requirement was enforced in his case. This then was highly significant, as it was in itself a tacit recognition of the status of his seminary by the Cardinal archbishop. Priests being ordained for religious orders did not come under this requirement as they were deemed to have their own standards and courses of preparation. Claude would have profited from his close association with the Jesuit theology students preparing for the priesthood at the college though they were destined to have the added bonus of a finishing year in their second novitiate at Rouen. Claude may even have been in contact with this house of higher spiritual formation, sacred to the memory of Père Lallemand.

In the light of the subsequent development of the seminary, this waiving by the Cardinal Archbishop of the normal obligation for Claude to attend a special extra course in priestly training amounted in fact to an implicit approval of the system of priestly formation already being put into operation by Claude – a tacit official recognition, therefore, of his work as being a major seminary. The fact that this tacit recognition by the Archbishop of Paris had not been formalised in any legal document was to cause serious problems later when the directors of the seminary were obliged to petition for official legal recognition, but in the intervening years

it saved the seminary from any unhelpful, even if well intentioned, intervention by Archbishop des Noailles with the internal direction of what was intended to be a very special type of seminary.¹²

There is some doubt about Claude's movements in early summer 1707. Though it had been decided that his ordination to the priesthood was to take place in December the required dimissorial letters from his home diocese were signed in Rennes as early as the 15 July by the Vicar General, Fr. Perrin, acting on behalf of the bishop, Mgr de Lavardin, who may have been out of town and the letters for some reason could not wait for his return. The natural explanation is that they were being asked for viva voce by someone who could not stay on. This could well be an indication that Claude had absented himself early on from Paris to allow either Le Barbier or Le Roy to be free later. It could also be that these letters were collected on his behalf by Fr. Le Barbier who would have been well known to the diocesan authorities as they had sponsored his leave of absence and would be in touch with developments in Paris. There were to be developments there very soon, and unpleasant news indeed for Claude and Fr. Le Barbier.

Fr. Jean Le Roy had come to the seminary from the diocese of Quimper where he had already been very highly thought of as a clerical student. A note written about him described him as a man on whom solid hopes for the future could be based. The future had arrived. The diocese received a new bishop in July 1707 in the person of the newly ordained Mgr de Ploëuc de Timeur. One of his first acts was to recall Fr. Le Roy for service in the diocese.¹³ This news at this juncture must have been a cruel blow to Claude. It was to be followed soon after by another traumatic shock. He knew his sister Jeanne-Françoise was expecting her second baby. The baby, a boy, was born 7 August. It would appear that Claude had been contacted to see if he could possibly attend the baptism. Letters would have taken quite a while to travel in those days. Claude had a lot on his desk just then with the recall of Fr. Le Roy, perhaps also the absence of Fr. Le Barbier in Rennes. It was at a time when all the preparations had to be attended to for the coming academic year. This involved interviews and written tests. So there was no possibility of Claude's turning up at the de Chat chateau at Vernée, Angers, until a full month after the birth of the baby. When one sees that babies were baptised then soon after their birth, even on the same day at times, one realises how much Claude's presence was sought for on this occasion. Then came the tragic news of the death of his sister's first baby, Louise-Françoise, on 23 August. Her infant body was buried the following day in the choir of the church of Chanteussé, most likely the chapel attached to the manor.¹⁴ Claude eventually arrived for the baptism ceremony which took place on 8 September, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady. It must have been an occasion of mixed joy and sadness, but it was a great consolation to Françoise and to her mother that Claude was able to join the family on this occasion having had to be absent for the wedding celebration. One almost expects then that the child should be named Claude but that was only the third choice, the first being Henry after his father and the second being Louis, no doubt in memory of his baby sister so recently deceased. Claude's mother naturally was there for the christening. There is no reference to the father who may well not have fancied long travel by coach.

One is rather surprised that in spite of the fact that Claude by then a deacon did not perform the solemn ceremony of baptism as he was entitled to do with due authorisation. Instead he acted as sponsor and in the extant baptismal register we find him entered as *noble et discret Claude Poullart, diacre, Supérieur du Séminaire du Saint-Esprit à Paris*.¹⁵ This is not how Claude would normally have allowed himself to be described in an official document, but perhaps on this one occasion

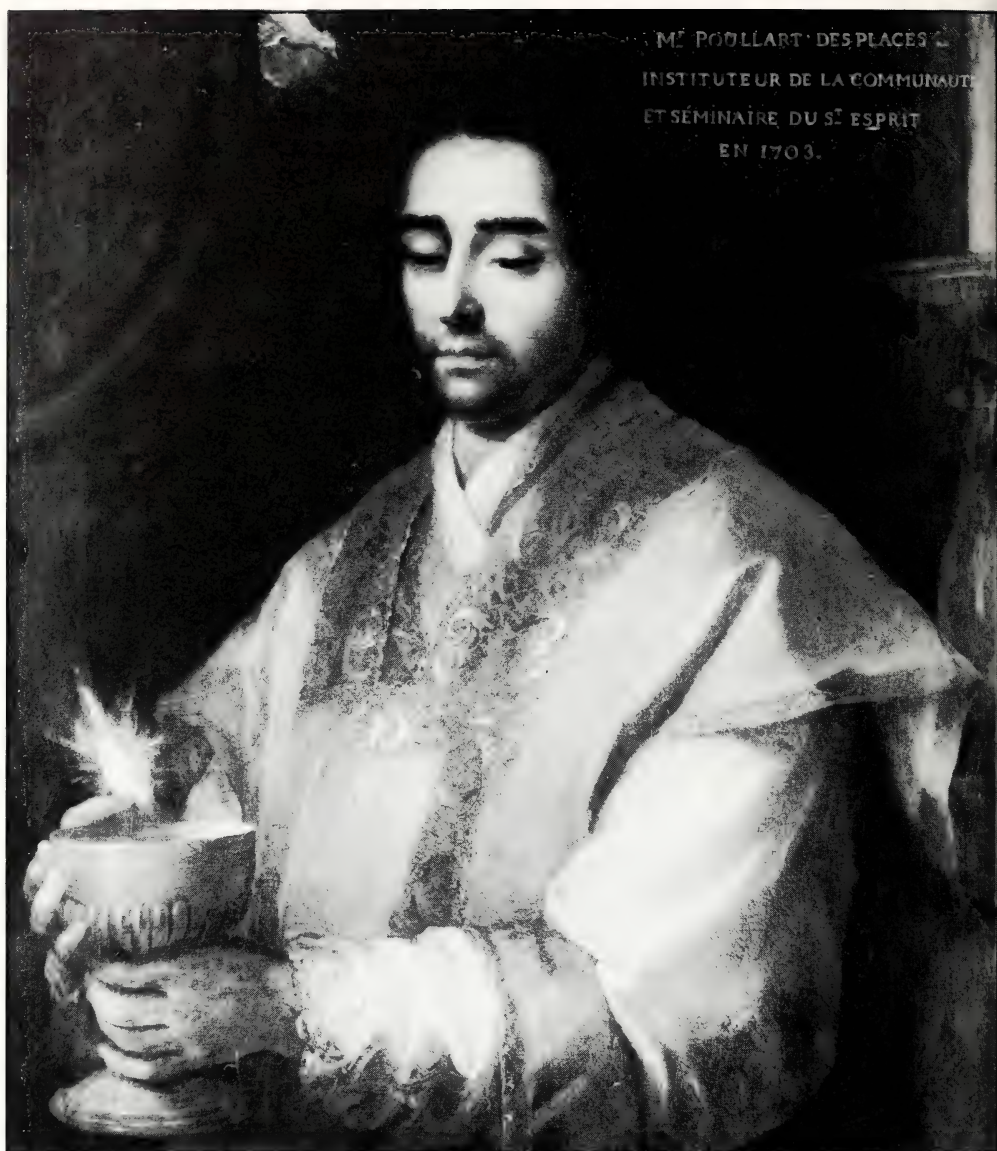
he may have waived his objections out of consideration for his beloved sister; and perhaps he gave a thought to the feelings of his father for whom the title noble spelt gold. When Mr des Places senior took that child into his arms and blessed him, like Simeon of old he could have justly sung his *Nunc Dimittis* because this child was set to carry on the noble status in the clan and to take his seat in the Parlement at Rennes as Conseiller and Seigneur de Vernée et de la Marmitière.¹⁶ Mercifully he was spared a clear glimpse of the more distant future: otherwise he might have seen the fate of the nobility in the Revolution. He was also spared the knowledge that this was to be the last time the des Places family were to meet on this side of eternity.

That autumn must have been a severe strain for Claude. The absence of Fr. Le Roy and his own absence in Vernée at a critical time meant that matters were not as well planned as he would have liked for the opening of the academic year, apart altogether from his own personal situation as he prepared for his ordination. He was fortunate to have Fr. Le Barbier at his side as well as their trusted friend, Jacques Garnier, who had been coopted as an associate while still a subdeacon. As Garnier was granted his dimissorial letters to the deaconate 7 Nov 1706 he could well have been ordained with Claude in December 1707 if he had not been advanced earlier that year. There were also the other senior students who had been with him since the foundation and who by now were familiar with the rules and the traditions which they saw evolving and with which they identified. Being part of the founding fathers, they could be relied on to give Claude their unstinted support and help in training the new arrivals.

All must have looked forward to the big day, 17 December, when their father and their hope would at last be raised to the priesthood, thus giving the seminary its final seal of approval. The actual ceremony would most likely have taken place at Collège Louis-le-Grand as for the occasion the Jesuits had invited their own ordaining prelate, Mgr de Thiard de Bissy, Bishop of Meaux, successor to Bossuet. He had formerly been abbot of Saint-Germain and was destined to be raised to the cardinalate and known as Cardinal de Bissy.¹⁷ His interest in Claude's foundation was to be life long. We shall have occasion to record his active support later.

We have no details about Claude's ordination. Today we would take it for granted that the ordinand's family would have been present at the ceremony. In those days of difficult travel conditions, especially in mid-winter, it is unlikely that his parents would have attempted the journey from Rennes, and it is not likely that his sister would have absented herself from the care of her young baby after her recent traumatic experience. That this would have been a very special day for the students of the seminary goes without saying, and they would naturally have been the first to kneel for their father's blessing. But it was also a very special day for the Jesuit community at Louis le Grand. They more than any one else had learned to appreciate Claude's sterling qualities. Further they appreciated what his seminary had meant for the prestige and the success of their great college which had so many enemies ready to fasten on its failures and indiscretions. It was obvious to the world that Claude's seminary owed its foundation and its continuing expansion to the support it was being given by the Jesuits at all levels, and there were few who would as yet openly attack this child of the great college. That day was bound to come, however, given the temper of the time.

Claude's first mass must have been a big occasion; too big for the premises at rue Rollin. To cater for all who would have wanted to be present and to have any refreshments after, one can be sure the ceremony took place at Louis le Grand. The first mass offered by Claude in the seminary he had founded must have been a memorable occasion for his large family. He was now their father indeed. It was an



Posthumous portrait of Claude as priest

*Je suis mort le quatorze jour de mai
1709. Poulart Desplaces P. de la*

Claude's signature 14th May 1709

occasion that today would have been recorded by all the amateur photographers in the community. An artist at a somewhat later period tried to recreate that occasion as he depicted in oils Claude vested as celebrant at mass and holding the chalice and host while overhead there hovers the Spirit as a dove. Since the portrait bears the inscription Claude Poullart des Places, Founder of the Society of the Holy Spirit one can take it for granted that it was painted after the official approval of the society by royal letters patent, 1734, but it has been suggested in favour of its authenticity that the painter may have used the sketch made for the earlier portrait of Claude by Jouvenet to commemorate his scholastic success at Saint Thomas' College, Rennes; and though this later study is inferior in quality to the other two portraits of Claude it is in itself a valued document as it was the official portrait of the founder which was on display in the seminary over the years.¹⁸

Finally we can well imagine that Claude at the earliest opportunity would have wanted to celebrate mass at the shrine of Notre Dame de bonne Délivrance where he had dedicated his infant community on Pentecost Sunday 1703.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In the first days Claude used his own limited pocket money to wonderful effect. Then the Jesuit bursar helped out in the matter of food. There is no evidence that the Jesuits helped with finance though there must have been many other ways in which they assisted the community as it expanded – providing books for their library, helping out in the matter of used clothing etc. It has been suggested that many of the guests calling to the Jesuit college and leaving their coaches in the area around the students' hostel may have been led in time to contribute to their upkeep. This seems to fit in with Rule 19 where we read: No woman is allowed to set foot in the house on any pretext whatsoever except benefactresses who want to come for reasons of charity and edification. Even such casual callers coming to help were rare in the beginning because as Fr. Thomas remarked: "Since the community was only beginning it was not well known, and those who did know it saw little in it beyond plans and promises. That is why it still had few benefactors".

Rumour had it that Claude had a vast fortune at his disposal and that he was being used by the Jesuits for their own purposes. The facts as we know them are that at no time did Claude appeal to his family for funds. He longed to be rid of all he possessed in order to depend on providence. Their association with the Jesuits did not help them in some people's opinion, especially those of Jansenist sympathies. That applied even to their local pastor in the parish of Saint-Benoit where Claude had begun his work among the poor Savoyards. The current pastor, Fr. Delamarre, who had the disposal of substantial funds in charity, would not have been sympathetic to Claude's community because of his undisguised sympathies with Jansenism. He would be more inclined to help those other seminaries run for the poor known as the *Gillotins*. They were being supervised by a Fr. Durrieux a close friend of Cardinal des Noailles and of known Jansenist persuasion. One of the Vicars General of the diocese, L'abbé Dorsanne, made no secret of his dislike of the students of the community and later he tried to influence the Cardinal to withdraw his recognition for the seminary.¹⁹

There were those of course who would be in favour of assisting Claude's community once they were known to be solidly on the side of orthodoxy as understood by those who were anti-Gallican and anti-Jansenist. Such would have been the clientele of Fr. Simon Gourdan, as we have already seen, and help may have come from that source. The greatest source of help would have been those in favour of the Jesuits. We are fortunate that once again legal documents

of the period conserved in public archives reveal the names of two such generous benefactors who were known to have been in close contact with the Jesuits. One Pierre Gorge, Seigneur of Antraisgues, is on record as having handed over to Claude the right to reclaim a debt to the value of 2,462 livres, namely the sum owed to Gorge by his nephew and due for repayment at a specified time. On the same day Gorge's eldest son also made over to Claude in his capacity as superior of the poor scholars the entitlement to the interest (1,250 livres) on a capital valued 22,400 livres. That both these gifts in favour of the seminary were made on the same day, 27 May 1707, may not have been entirely fortuitous as this was the fourth anniversary of the foundation. These sums were not immediately available to Claude, however, as the dates specified for the transfer of the cash were July 1708 and May 1709. In the meantime he found himself without the money to pay his landlord the rent for the year 1707, so he had to borrow 1,000 livres from a parishioner of their new parish of Saint Etienne-du-Mont.²⁰

As to how Claude made the acquaintance of these wealthy benefactors is not known. Pierre Gorge was originally from Nantes where he had large business commitments which may or may not have been linked with the commerce carried on by Claude's father. He was living at this time in Paris close to the Abbey of Saint Genéviève where he was in a position to observe the students each day as they went to and from lectures. That Claude was intimately known to the family is proved by another legal document where we find that he acted as a ghost buyer of a sizeable property in the suburbs of Paris only to sign over his interest in it immediately to Peter d'Antraisgues his friend and benefactor.

Benefactors of this level of affluence and generosity would have been few and far between, however, and the pickings from charity in the declining years of the Sun King were sparse on account of the crises caused by his wars and extravagant exploits of grandeur. Institutions which depended on public charity were going through very hard times already before the great famine of 1709 struck. The superior of Saint Sulpice, Fr. Lechassier, gave expression to his worries in a letter, 8 February 1708, as follows: "The times we live in are difficult in material matters, especially for communities who have to try to support poor students". There would be times ahead when only Divine Providence stood between the students and starvation when the bread-baskets and the coffers were empty.²¹ Yet in spite of the fact that there was no regular dependable income and that they literally depended on providence for survival, Claude wrote into his rule the following unequivocal statements of policy:

5 In this house we shall admit only those students whose poverty, conduct and aptitude for study are known to us.

6 We can never under any circumstance admit a student who could pay for his board in another establishment. However we may admit some students who, although they are not desperately poor, are not able to pay for themselves elsewhere. It would be good to ask these for a contribution towards ordinary expenses of the house so as to make sure that the number of poor students, who should always be given first preference, is not reduced.

Here, as elsewhere throughout his rule, we see Claude stating clearly the ideals while tempering the implementing of them to the human situations. And though Claude was totally committed to a life of poverty and had set out to inculcate a spirit of evangelical poverty among the members of his community, both staff and students alike, at no time did he confound poverty with enforced mortification or countenance a regime of semi-starvation or undue austerity as had obtained

in other seminaries for disadvantaged students of that period about which much has been written.

That the fare could not have been sumptuous in such unsubsidised institutions is understandable, especially at certain times of the year and in times of near famine caused by crop failure or by the recurring wars. But matters were not helped by directors who held too rigidly to such opinions as that the menu should be kept to a minimum in quantity and quality on principle lest the students be spoilt if provided with fare superior to what they had been accustomed to among the poor from whom they came, or lest they should later on opt for a standard of living higher than that enjoyed by the people they were to minister to. Whatever may have been the good intentions behind such motives, in practice the result was too often a regime which inflicted much hardship and undermined strong constitutions. Claude would have heard reports from students of such seminaries. His former schoolmates at Rennes, Grignon de Montfort and John B. Blain, suffered from such a regime in the community for poor students conducted by Fr. Boucher at Paris. Blain has left us with this description of conditions in that community in his memoir on Grignon de Montfort:

In his new community M. Grignon found ample scope for indulging his great inclination for poverty and mortification. The food, like everything else in the community, was very poor and quite disgusting and on the way to the refectory it was very easy to imitate the great saint who said that he went to his meals as though he were going to a kind of torment: *Ad mensam tanquam ad patibulum*. The offal and the kind of butcher's meat which only the poorest could afford was served in tiny portions and even if these had been much bigger no one would have been tempted to eat too much because the mere sight of the meat was enough to satisfy the most hungry students and one had to do great violence to oneself and overcome one's repugnance to eat that kind of sickening food which caused constant nausea and which could hardly be kept down. I am talking from personal experience because I stayed with that community at the time. It is now near the Junior seminary and everything has changed a good deal since then.

Each student had to provide himself with bread, so he could choose it and eat it at his own discretion; as for water, there was no shortage of it and the community used it generously as wine was not yet known there. Abstinence days brought little to make up for the lack of appetizing food on ordinary days: the students were served with rice cooked in water and laced with very little milk, or they had swedes and broad beans seasoned in the same way. The students themselves were well able to do this kind of cooking, and they took it in turns.²²

Various expedients had been resorted to in order to alleviate the hardship of students depending on such unsubsidised communities. In a history of the Irish College in Paris we find this interesting paragraph on how the problem was faced up to at one period:

From time immemorial, say the provisors, the priests, who are students in philosophy, attend lectures at the Collège des Grassins. The clerics for the past sixty years, they say, have attended the lectures at the College of Plessis. The provisors add that there was a debt of gratitude due by the clerics to the Plessis college. In former times the principal of that college entertained every day twelve Irish clerics at dinner. In more recent years the usage had been

changed , and each day a certain quantity of bread was sent to the community of clerics by the principal of Plessis...²³

Napoleon as a wise general knew that an army marches on its stomach. Claude realised that the dining room was as vital to life in the seminary as was the chapel or study hall. In the section in his rule dealing with meals and attitudes to food we can see him try to combine several approaches to this mundane but fundamentally human matter. While endeavouring to inculcate norms of etiquette for young men not particularly tutored in such matters, as well as forming attitudes of necessary mortification and stressing religious principles, he does not adopt a too moralising tone, and above all we see his humanity and caring approach to the young men committed to his care. We quote a number of the more relevant articles of his rule:

58. All shall eat in common but in profound silence, paying less attention to feeding the body than to nourishing the soul by the reading that is done during the meal.

59. No one shall be served anything special. The portions shall always be equally distributed among all. Sickness alone shall justify making an exception to this rule.

60. On walk days and feast days the Superior shall provide something extra at the meals.

65. If an individual has cause to believe that he needs something extra either to look after or regain his health, let him tell the Superior who shall provide him with every possible means to make things easier for him.

66. Since the individuals are in no way to be concerned about their food and should gratefully eat what is put before them, the Superior shall keep a close watch on the meals and make full use of his powers to remedy any possible deficiencies.

67. To ensure greater uniformity nothing more shall be served to the Superior than to all the others in the house. All should be pleased to consider themselves like poor people to whom providence provides what food is put before them in the refectory.

68. Apart from the days designated by the Church, there shall be no other days of fast. The only exception to this rule is the eve of the Immaculate Conception, which has been chosen as the principal Marian feast of the house.

69. No one shall eat too quickly for that is gluttony, nor too slowly for that is sensuality.

70. All shall be satisfied with what is served up without looking for something better. God gave us the sense of taste to help us eat and not to flatter our sensuality. Anyone who has a taste for the things of the spirit is not so demanding nor so hard to please in the things of the body.

Consequently, no one shall ask the waiters for anything special but everyone shall eat his portion as it is served to him.

72. No one shall talk about his likes or dislikes (in the matter of food).

73. Neither praise nor blame shall be bestowed on what has been served. It is unworthy of a true Christian to think too much about these things, to

go on about or complain about them. For all the more reason it is a lack of mortification for a Religious or a cleric to fall into this fault.

76. Everyone shall cut his bread and meat as good manners and mortification dictate and not as pleasure would have one do.

77. No one shall ever complain that the food is badly prepared or that it lacks one seasoning or another. Feelings of this kind should never be made known by gestures.... A slightly mortified person, which we all should be, eats indiscriminately whatever he is given. He finds everything good if he considers that his God quenched his thirst with gall and vinegar.²⁴

78. It would be one of the most serious faults to speak at length about such matters with one's friends. However, it is permissible to mention it briefly to the Superior if one thinks one's health may be affected.

These directives on attitudes and behaviour in the matter of eating make less than exciting reading. Taken out of context they may even provoke mere humorous comments; but given the context of this young founder – himself but a student among students, trying to put on paper the ideals and the norms of behaviour that could be understood by these young men whose limitations in these matters he knew so well, and whom he wanted to help and form – these directives then reveal Claude to us much better than could a collection of detached reflections on more spiritual topics. They show him at once idealistic and practical. He knew from experience exactly at what stages these young men were at, having mixed with them day in day out in their normal activities. He was not legislating from any eminence of position or age but as one of themselves, leading them along with plain common sense and a spirituality they could understand rather than laying it on the line for them as one superior to them. As such this often underrated document affords us the opportunity of coming into the closest contact possible with Claude's special charisma as the formator of future pastors who could be relied on to bring Christian values into the lives of ordinary people and do so with a human approach.

Elsewhere when Claude ventured to give precise directives in the area of polite behaviour and etiquette he left himself open to the ridicule of succeeding generations secure in the conviction that their own standards were the norm. Claude being a man of his own time was trying to prepare his young men for life in the age of Louis XIV. In striking contrast to many others of the time he concentrates on those aspects of civilised behaviour and consideration for others which are perennial. He is far removed from the artificial etiquette satirised by Molière in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. We shall have occasion to observe more of such directives when he deals with other areas of the students' activities but before quitting the domain of food we take note of what directives he gives in the particular rules for those serving at table as all the students had to do in turn. For the attention of the Steward and assistant Steward he wrote:

169. The Steward is responsible for the wine, the beer, and all other things that concern the table.

Before the meal he puts the wine in flasks. Each one is to have no more than one gill, (roquille, i.e. ca 1/4 litre) and only at lunch and dinner. He may give a second helping but never more to those who ask and have the means to pay.

He also fills flasks for the Superiors and Repetitors so as to give them each two gills at every meal.

In this context it is worth recalling that according to Clorivière, Claude had made a vow while yet a student at Rennes, to abstain forever from the use of wine, and

the Aa records mention that he drank only water.²⁵ But it speaks much for his humanity that he made clear provision for wine on the daily menu for his students and staff.

Looking very far forward for a moment to a time when, because of various upheavals, the students of the community were less than content with the changes being introduced by a new management, the director, Fr. Lannurien, when applying for improvements in the catering department wrote: "They (the students) will judge us on the quality of our cooking".²⁶ Claude, for his part, had devoted much attention to conditions in the kitchen and dining room in his efforts to create a caring community for his students from the start.



Maison des Mottais cf. p. 171

Article 2^o De la Reception des Sujets

On ne recevra dans cette maison
que des Sujets dont on connaitra la
pauvrete, les mœurs, et l'aptitude
pour les sciences.

On ne pourra sous quelque
pretexte que ce puisse être, y
admettre des gens en état de
pouvoir payer ailleurs leur pension

A Model Seminary

We are not surprised to learn that orthodoxy in teaching had been singled out as a cachet of the seminary founded by Claude, or that it was noted for a high standard of religious formation and practice; but considering that this house was in fact a refuge for the disadvantaged student and was essentially oriented towards preparing priests who would be committed to minister among the marginalised in society, one does not expect that a high level of academic attainment would be a priority or that Claude would have been notably demanding in the standard insisted on at entrance and that he would be adamant in seeing that the students maintained not merely a high standard of application but that they made adequate progress in their academic attainment. The facts prove that he was very insistent in this sphere of formation. Academic attainment was not, of course, the prime consideration. Stress was laid on the qualities required in a good pastor, as we shall see, but the presence of these qualities in a candidate did not influence Claude to waive his demands in the matter of the academic advance to be registered all along the road to ordination. All this is spelt out in the directives given by his Rule in the area governing admittance and subsequent testing:

5 In this house we shall admit only students whose poverty, conduct and aptitude for study are known to us.

7 No one shall be accepted, no matter how highly recommended he may be, who has not completed his classical studies and has not the capacity needed to begin either philosophy or theology.

8 Those who present themselves as candidates shall be required to undergo a written and an oral examination....

10 Students accepted into this house shall be examined twice a year in their studies as well as their conduct – that is, at the end of Lent and at the end of July. The Superior shall send away those who have not given satisfaction and who do not give grounds for the future.

One might ask why did Claude set such store by achieving high academic standards as well as ensuring orthodoxy in doctrine and loyalty to church teaching. One might trace this attitude to his own brilliant success as a student at second and third levels. But he was not an intellectual snob expecting all to be geniuses. He realised that there would be those whose progress would be slower than average for one reason or another and he made special provision for such students, not by way of lowering for them the level of what was expected but by providing all the assistance possible to enable them to give of their best and so attain the normal standard. It was stated clearly in the Rule that all were to feel free to question their mentors about matters not fully understood in the lectures; they were even encouraged to do so. The repetitors in their turn were also reminded of their duty to go out of their way to help in this respect.(53)

A clue to the reason why Claude was so insistent on maintaining a high standard of studies in his seminary is found in the statement so clearly associated with him as indicating his customary approach that it was quoted some years after his death in the brief biographical notice printed in the ecclesiastical 'Who was Who', *Gallia*

Christiana. The fact that this statement of policy is mentioned is in itself highly significant as it reflects the reputation he had left after him:

The zeal of a pious cleric without learning is blind; whereas a learned cleric without piety is always in danger of becoming a heretic and a rebel within the Church. (*Gallia Christiana*, 1744, VII, col. 1043)

For Claude, then, a pastor inflamed by zeal but bereft of a sound grounding in theological studies would be a case of the blind leading the blind with dangerous consequences for christian living in his little community.

As we dwell on this significant stance taken by Claude in the type of formation he set out to provide for his future priests, it is of interest to note that a similar attitude had been expressed by the man Claude so much admired and whose life story had a determining influence on his life, namely Michel Le Nobletz. Nobletz, when giving guidelines to his friends at the law school by then preparing for the priesthood, stressed the necessity for serious application to study not in order to qualify for the coveted licentiate but so as to acquire the wisdom that was so vital a necessity for worthwhile pastoral work.¹ Wisdom of course is really a gift, but the intensive study of theology as envisaged by Nobletz and by Claude was understood as preparing the ground for the acquisition of such practical wisdom, especially in some areas of controversy then disturbing the life of the church in France.

What was remarkable about Claude's requirements in his plan for a seminary was that the course of studies was to extend over a period of at least six years, two being devoted to the study of scholastic philosophy and four to theology. This was to become the norm later for all seminaries but to say that it was not the rule insisted on by the end of the 17th century for all being ordained would be an understatement. Take for example, l'Abbé Clement, who came to Claude in 1709 to make arrangements for the founding of a training school for teachers in country schools; he was only 20 years of age at the time! And he was by no means an exception in having been promoted to the priesthood at such an early age. To qualify for a worthwhile benefice or ecclesiastical post to which there was a sizeable income assured, was often the motive for such early ordinations. Incidentally, the Church in Ireland had a special problem in this regard. Students for the priesthood were ordained early in order to avail of mass stipends to pay for their keep and tuition at some college or other on the continent. The unsatisfactoriness of such an expedient helps us to appreciate more fully the value of the service being provided by Claude for his students and the need for such at the time when as yet few dioceses were adequately organised to cope with the situation.

For Claude's impecunious young men there was now provided the guarantee of six years of uninterrupted study without having to worry about how to pay for their keep at the same time. Claude's seminary had much more to offer than its first class course of studies, of course, but on the other hand there was the notable disadvantage of being cut off from a university degree and in consequence being almost certainly ruled out of all prospects of any lucrative post in the church in later years. Possibly such a limitation of future prospects was not seen to be of vital significance at the start of their studies. They were very glad to be accepted in such a haven at that stage, and later, when they had been formed by Claude, they would approach such a limitation of their prospects as something positive rather than negative. They would come to see their position as an incentive to embrace evangelical poverty as part of their vocation as pastors.

What Claude was providing his students in the way of a high-grade academic training was of course done by courtesy of the Jesuit faculties of philosophy and

theology at Louis le Grand as they provided all this tuition free of charge. This was an extraordinary advantageous opportunity. It was somewhat anomalous in that at this stage the relative number of Jesuit and guest students would appear as if the tail was wagging the dog. In 1705 there were only 45 Jesuit students in the theology faculty and Claude's family was rapidly expanding.

The subject matter, the system of tuition and the standard of philosophy and theology as taught at Louis le Grand has been well documented in the specialist works of de Lattre, Dupont-Ferrier and others. At an earlier period the known standard of the tuition was sufficient to have it accorded by Rome the right of granting degrees to its students in the faculties of philosophy and theology. Such a right to confer degrees however was subject to the approval of the University of Paris and that approval was not forthcoming in favour of the Jesuits in particular. Claude's firm option for the course of studies at Louis le Grand in spite of this limitation in the matter of degrees was not based on any mere personal whim. Even when urged by the Archbishop of Paris, traditionally Provost of the Sorbonne, to send his students to some college linked with the University, Claude firmly refused. He made the point that his objection to such a course was based not on rejection of degrees as such but that it was an integral part of his formation to rule out the lure of degrees during formation in order to acclimatise his protégés to concentrate their aims and ideals on posts neglected by priests with university qualifications. He did not exclude studying for a degree after ordination if there was a good reason. In fact he provided for such cases in his rule No 11. If pressed by Cardinal des Noailles to send his students to one of the university sponsored colleges while precluding them from accepting degrees, it is certain that Claude would still not have agreed. A big consideration was the orthodoxy of the teaching at the Jesuits' college as against the alleged Jansenist and Gallican tendencies associated with some of the colleges under the aegis of the University, including the Sorbonne itself.

As to the system of tuition employed at Louis le Grand there was the special feature of the repetition classes and the formal scholastic discussion sessions where the matter covered in the official lectures was teased out and more fully dealt with at a personal level. The repetition classes in particular, though meant to help all, played a vital role in taking theology within the comprehension of the less gifted students and it tells us much about Claude that he gave this institution an honoured status in his Rule. Brilliant though he was, and perhaps he would have preferred to study alone as he had prized the seclusion of his room at Louis le Grand for personal prayer, he now espouses the cause of the slow learner and the diffident student. He even utilises their limitations as a means of elaborating a system of formation in the area of study. The seeking of assistance from one another was to be part of the education process and all were encouraged to take an active part in discussions. Each student was urged to volunteer to answer when problems were posed in class, and all were expected without exception when his turn came to defend a thesis against the objections from his peers.

Claude saw this as the best form of learning and an excellent preparation for public appearance later on when as pastors the teaching of the church would have to be explained and defended. So, though there is no question of claiming that Claude had invented the *repetition* system, it is quite clear that he saw its rich potentialities and made sure that it was operated as a leading exercise in the seclusion of their own house in addition to whatever such exercises they took part in together with the Jesuit students at the college. And when the day came that the Jesuits were expelled from Louis le Grand and the pressure was put on the directors of the Seminary to take part at last in the university system, it was

unanimously decided that they could and would function on their own, carrying on the traditions and methods they had learned to value at the Jesuits' college. The directives that Claude had included in his Rule governing this central service of the seminary were faithfully adhered to as a matter of pietas or abiding loyalty to the ideals of the Founder. These clear and succinct directives speak for themselves. Having the benefit of a legal training, Claude appreciated the importance of clear and precise directives as to times and the matters to be studied. Study was the main occupation of the house and such an important matter needed to be indicated in detail. The Rule does just that:

45. There shall be eight and a half hours of study on class days, about six and a half hours on Sundays, and on days where the college does not hold class but which are not walk-days at the House, there shall be ... and a half hours of study. Hours of study include the time devoted to class, repetitions, and the preparation of Holy Scripture.
46. Students who are in philosophy shall study nothing but philosophy, and those in theology nothing but theology, unless they have special permission.
47. No text in philosophy nor in theology is to be studied unless the Superior is previously consulted about it.
48. Special hours shall be set aside for the study of moral theology and for the preparation of conferences with the students of theology who are sufficiently advanced for this purpose.
49. All shall be obliged, one by one and following a schedule, to defend a thesis publicly in the house. A period of one and a half hours, once a week is spent on this. The students called upon to offer objections shall not fail to do so nor make any excuses.
50. On feast days and Sundays half an hour of preparation shall precede the explanation of Holy Scripture. This shall be followed by its class of repetition.
51. Every day there shall be two repetitions for the students of theology and one for those in philosophy. On Sundays and holy-days theologians too shall have only one repetition.
52. Both philosophers and theologians are strongly urged to join in discussion and to offer answers in class as often as possible.
53. They shall also feel free to ask the repetitors to solve their difficulties. The latter shall set apart certain hours during which they shall be at the disposal of the students to make plain things that are not clear.
54. Finally in points of doctrine we exhort them to remain always attached to the decisions of the Church towards which they should be totally submissive.

Having stressed the value of personal involvement in discussions and having specifically obliged each and every student to defend a thesis when his turn came we are not surprised that he made provision for the more elaborate defence of a major thesis at the end of the academic year, a throw back, so to speak, to his own experience when deputed at the end of his philosophy course to defend the Grand Acte at St Thomas' College in Rennes. This more elaborate exercise, referred to in Rule no 12, was to take place not in the enclosed quarters of their own house but in the more public circumstances of Louis le Grand with not merely the college students and staff as audience but most likely with invited guests from the world

outside as had happened in Rennes in 1698. And as such an occasion as this would call for the production of a suitable ornamented scroll which would cost money, provision was made that the House or Seminary would meet the expense involved. The Rule reads as follows: Students who are able to do so shall defend a thesis in Class, at the end of the year. The costs shall gladly be met (by the house) when these students deserve such an outlay. We can be sure that the main motive in encouraging the students to aim at such an honour was not to pander to vanity but to provide an incentive for the more brilliant among them just as he had catered for the slower learners elsewhere.

There are no records extant in the Seminary itself to prove that Rule no 12 had been put into operation during Claude's own life time but we are fortunate that evidence has emerged from another source to prove that two student whose names appear on the early register of the Seminary, René Le Sauvage and Michael Granger de la Borde, were called on to defend a thesis publicly at Louis le Grand on 28 July 1708. The extant scroll is significantly decorated with the image of Claude's patron, Saint-Claude, blessing a young child. That was his signature tune or readily recognisable Logo, as legend had it that he restored such a young child to life by his blessing.² In the absence of all contemporary memorabilia from the early years of the Seminary the discovery of this scroll has a special nostalgic significance.

What is really remarkable, is that Claude envisages a possible post-graduate course lasting for two years but oriented to the practical ministry, the subjects to be studied in depth being moral theology and canon law (No 11). He even allows for degrees to be taken in these subjects thus making it clear that he was not against degrees per se. He saw that degree men might on occasion be necessary in these sciences whereas a degree in dogmatic theology might come under the category of a luxury referred to by Claude's father when Claude himself expressed the desire to study at the Sorbonne. His father was quoted then as saying that he had heard many doctors from the Sorbonne preaching and that they were not the better preachers for their doctorates! By now Claude had good reasons for ruling out degrees for his students, at least until they were sufficiently formed to be able to withstand the risks. As we have seen he wanted to be certain of an orthodox teaching free from every trace of Jansenism and Gallicanism and that was not always guaranteed at colleges conducted under the aegis of the University. Then the expenses involved in studying for degrees were very high, and apart from their lack of funds, depending as they were on voluntary donations, the very purpose of his establishment, as was to be officially stated later, was:

To train in a hard and toilsome life and in perfect detachment, curates, missionaries, and clerics to serve in hospitals, in poor parishes, and in other abandoned posts for which bishops can hardly find anybody...³

This statement of objectives may well have come from Claude though for reasons of prudence was never inserted into the rule. It bears a striking resemblance to a statement about the activities of the members of the Aa which was read publicly at their solemn renewal meetings:

These gentlemen leave almost everywhere shining evidence of their piety and their charity. Here you have only to visit the hospitals, descend into the prisons, search through the houses of the poor and afflicted, go out into the countryside, traverse the provinces, fly over the seas, and you will see with admiration the marvellous fruits of their unflagging zeal.⁴

Normally then, all that would tend to undermine this outlook in life was to be removed from the training of the students and it is significant that Claude's successor, Fr. Bouic, made no exception for the postgraduate study of the practical sciences of theology. There were to be no degrees even there, so he removed from N^o 11 the words "in which they are permitted to take a degree". But when Bouic went public on this matter in his application for Royal Letters patent, he came up against the virulent opposition from the University which Claude had managed to avoid.⁵

PASTORAL ORIENTATIONS

Not all are born orators and the art of preaching a practical and persuasive homily is not included in the gift of a vocation to the priesthood; it is a very desirable adjunct however. For the few the art of preaching comes naturally; for the majority it has to be consciously cultivated and provision for the practice of this function of the priesthood has been a necessary part of the training given in seminaries. Claude, because of his training for the stage and for law, had been groomed to be an orator and had at one time visualised the priesthood in terms of swaying large crowds by the force of his eloquence. His models would have been the great preachers of his time, Bossuet and Bourdaloue. Later on he learned that there was much more to the pastoral life of the priest than the practice of oratory, but having outgrown his original simplistic concept of the Catholic priesthood he was still convinced that preaching the word or God, whether to children or to adults, was a vital and very neglected part of the pastor's work at that time. We can be sure that Claude was not the first to introduce training in the art of preaching and catechetics as a serious part of seminary life but we are left in no doubt that he gave it a place and a prominence that is clearly seen from his directives on the matter. Once again what he has to say is brief, clear and commonsense:

In order to teach the students public-speaking, subjects of sermons and homilies shall be assigned to the theologians. The philosophers shall be given chapters of the Bible to read out during dinner on Sundays, holy-days and free days on which there is no walk scheduled.

Since ecclesiastics have the duty of instructing others, and even children, the superior shall designate one of the students to teach catechism to his confreres. He shall instruct them and they shall reply as if they were children.... (56-7)

And among the duties of the Repetitor for Scripture Claude prescribes as follows:

It is his function to indicate the individuals who are to deliver their sermons or their chapters of the Old Testament in the dining room. He shall assign the subject matter of the sermons and subsequently correct the resulting essays. He shall make the students practise their presentation during some recreation periods. (133)

Incidentally, one notices the prominence accorded by Claude to the study and the proper public reading of Sacred Scripture. This was not the general practice at the time; the stress seems to have been on the reading of commentators and devotional writers. One is left with the clear impression from Claude's Rule that the proper study of Scripture and the habit of reading the Bible as spiritual reading was of clear importance in the formation he wanted to give future priests. Nos 50, 131

and 133 in particular make this point. Claude's successor, Fr. Bouic, was set on carrying on this tradition. In No 11, where Claude had made provision for a possible two years postgraduate course to study moral theology and canon law, Bouic has crossed out canon law and substituted the word scripture.

Claude's guidelines for the teaching of Scripture as outlined in the duties of Repetitors are worth quoting:

The Repetitor of Scripture shall give one repetition of three quarters of an hour every Sunday and holy-day. 1) He shall begin by explaining or having someone else explain Scripture word by word. 2) If the passages in question should contain something controversial, then he shall quote the different opinions of the Fathers and authors. 3) He shall draw a moral lesson, in accord with the best scriptural interpreters, from the chapters he has explained. (131)

For the source of the importance given to scriptural studies we can safely point to Fr. Le Tellier in his capacity as professor of scripture and director of the Aa.

Read in the light of Claude's opting for confining his students to the Jesuit college in spite of certain disadvantages, Rule no 54 takes on a very special significance: Finally in points of doctrine we exhort the students always to remain attached to the decisions of the church towards which they should be totally submissive. In the days when Gallicanism had penetrated deeply into the mind and heart of theologians and church leaders in France this clear statement of his allegiance by the young seminary director, who was as yet not even ordained, takes on a special significance; and in the light of the subsequent development of the Seminary it can be seen to be no mere pious exhortation with little influence on practical attitudes. That the Seminary was well known for its adherence to orthodoxy and its loyalty to Rome is a matter of French ecclesiastical history and it was to be a factor in the confiding in 1853 of the direction of the new national French Seminary in Rome to the society founded by Claude. Its traditions had been by then wholeheartedly reinforced by Fr Libermann. Fr. Joseph Grandet, the biographer of Grignon de Montfort, was himself a product of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. When dealing with the close relations that existed between Grignon and the Seminary founded by Claude he wrote:

Fr. Valois (a prominent follower of Grignon) had spent ten years in the community of the Holy Spirit in Paris. He served as a Repetitor in philosophy and theology for the poor clerical students whom Fr. des Places – a priest of remarkable piety, had assembled there to train in the principles of the most sound doctrines of the Roman and Catholic church and in the maxims governing clerical life.⁶

Conscious as Claude was that the study of theology was no mere academic or intellectual exercise but that as it was to be a wholehearted effort to assimilate as far as it was humanly possible the great truths of Divine revelation, he exhorted his students to approach the study of theology in a prayerful mood. Before beginning study of God's truth they were to implore light from the Spirit of Truth himself, and, significantly in the light of the twin dedication of their work to the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate, Claude directs the students to implore Mary's help in her role as Spouse of the Spirit. In Rule No. 30 Claude puts this attitude in simple clear statements which no doubt he frequently expounded in his talks to the assembled students:

Before every period of study or revision all shall invoke the light of the Holy Spirit to enable them to work profitably. To that end they shall recite the *Veni Sancte*, adding an *Ave Maria* in honour of the Blessed Virgin to obtain light from her Spouse. The same prayer shall be said before the spiritual reading and the *Sub tuum praesidium*.

That these prayers were not chosen just because it was the common practice in the church we can be certain. One can be sure that Claude and these early disciples were very conscious of their original dedication as a group when their weakness made them put all their trust in the Holy Spirit and His Spouse.

COURTESY AND CLEANLINESS

A thorough grounding in theology was an obvious part of the training of candidates for the priesthood. An important part surely but still only one aspect of a rounded education and perhaps not the most important in the eyes of the ordinary people with whom a pastor would come in daily contact. He would be judged at first sight at least on his general behaviour, his life-style, and his attitude towards people. Claude was convinced that Christianity in practice called for courtesy – a manner of behaviour based not on the artificial etiquette handed down from the court life of Louis XIV but emanating from values held with inner personal conviction. The courtesy then that Claude would strive to inspire in his protégés was to be based on their attitude to God, namely an intimacy combined with profound reverence, and then on respect for persons and things as being his creation. Respect for oneself, for others, and for things, would flow gradually but surely from these convictions. And as all lack of courtesy is based on selfishness or lack of consideration for the rights and sensibilities of others, Claude sets out to strike hard at the innate tendency of untutored young bloods to act out of unbridled instinct; he encourages them to form habits of self control and a sense of consideration for the rights of others even in the small details of their behaviour.

Many of the young men Claude had to form were from impoverished backgrounds where their families and associates would have little acquaintance with the practice of the social graces. These had to be taught through a code of behaviour laid down for their prayer in common, for the dining room, for their movements and actions throughout the house etc. The poverty of their background and upbringing would not mean that their families would not have had their own standards and accepted code of polite behaviour in the home and in their dealings with their neighbours, but the circumstances of seminary life would have removed many of the family constraints; and then the standard of behaviour in this area expected of the future pastors called for a more conscious approach to the process of learning how to behave in living with others and for others. Away from the family ambience and cast among a sizeable community – all males and of their own age group, with the appetites and energies of growing young men not particularly geared to practising the social graces, there was a very special need to spell out clearly an accepted code of behaviour which would be continually kept before the minds of all. Hence the importance given to these aspects in the written Rule.

First there were the general principles to be inculcated; these would be but the practical application of Christian values to the art of living with others. But obviously one could not be content with enunciating general guidelines. At times one had to be specific, and when one enters into the matter of specific directives in the area of etiquette one runs the risk of being open to challenge by contemporaries and being ridiculed by succeeding generations as the norms of social behaviour

vary from age to age. So we are not to judge the appropriateness of Claude's directives by relating them to our own circumstances. Much of what Claude has in his Rule by way of general principles and concrete applications would have been influenced by what was the known practice in other seminaries at that time. We are distinctly informed by an early biographer, Fr. Besnard, that Claude sought the advice of some experienced persons as he drew up his Rule. It may well be possible even to trace his sources. It is not practical to attempt that interesting exercise within the limits of our purpose here, namely to examine what the Rule as it stands has to say about Claude himself. It is worth mentioning, however, at this stage that there is clear evidence in Claude's written rule that he was being influenced by ideals and guidelines to be found in the manual composed for the members of the Aa.⁷

Irrespective of the various sources Claude may have tapped there can be no mistaking that what he has actually composed does not smack of a pastiche of unrelated borrowings. One senses clearly that in this particular area Claude is drawing on his own innate good breeding and is using his sound common sense in his approach to training these young men with whom he is in constant daily contact as they pursued their studies, their common prayers, their recreation and had their meals together. Furthermore one senses that he is not dictating an impersonal code just for the sake of having a Rule as was customary for all other seminaries. He is speaking from the assumption of deeply rooted attitudes of thinking and behaving, and is spontaneously laying down the markers for social behaviour in their own particular circumstances so as to achieve the ideal of a peaceful and caring community where all are animated with Christian charity and have chosen to practice evangelical simplicity and poverty.

Knowing that we tend to think as we normally act, Claude sets out to provide directives for behaviour in certain key areas of the students' lives. Not unnaturally he gives priority to the outward manifestation of their reverence for God in their attitude and posture during common prayer, especially the Eucharist. Rule 36 reads: Assistance at Holy Mass with the greatest possible respect can never be recommended too highly. In Rule 87 Claude states this attitude in the simplest terms: Wherever one is, one behaves as befits a cleric, above all in church and during exercises of piety. Then descending into details he writes (88): When at Mass, all shall go as close as possible to the altar rail without, however, kneeling on the step. Out of reverence for God, everyone shall kneel both knees on the bare stone!

Intimacy yes, but always with reverence even if it costs. The directives in the matter of posture and general behaviour in church are clearly linked with the motive of reverence rather than starting from the motive of mortification. Simply stated, his motives are positive rather than starting from negation of self. Self denial comes as an overflow from one's reverence.

Again Claude's directives on avoiding distractions at prayer in allowing one's eyes to wander or in giving way to aimless curiosity in observing what others are doing during prayer in common or during mealtime, are aimed at fostering a spirit of recollection or interiority so as to be present to oneself rather than being a plaything of passing events and being caught unawares by accidental occurrences. Control of their speed of movement and the amount of noise they make is stressed for these young men of high spirits in order that they may learn to take control of themselves and be sensitive to the effect of their actions on others:

During the Holy Sacrifice, and meditation, and spiritual reading, etc., no one should allow his eyes to wander hither and thither. ... No one shall turn his head

around during these times because of any sound he may hear. .. In the house the stairs shall be mounted or descended quietly and without noise. In places destined for prayer nobody should slouch; for God is more especially present there and it is fitting to maintain deep reverence in his presence. Postures that are slovenly or lazy are to be avoided, as are all those little tricks of self seeking that are preoccupied with looking for what is comfortable at the expense of self discipline.... (90-95).

It became a practice in later times to locate centres of clerical formation as far as possible from sources of distraction. For the reasons already covered, Claude's seminary was located in the centre of Paris. Being in the city provided advantages, but as many of the students would be destined to spend their lives in the heart of the country and all were dedicated to simplicity and avoidance of luxury in all aspects of their life, certain directives and admonitions about their reactions to city life had to be incorporated into the Rule. One can be sure that Claude spoke to the students on this topic regularly in his conferences or daily talks. In the Rule he limits himself to a few clear statements giving general principles and some very concrete directives:

Out on the streets one should not look into the shops or at signs, the eyes not fixed far ahead, but only three or four paces. There are persons who would have preserved their purity of heart and their interior life had they not glanced about curiously, even by sheer surprise. All shall avoid ... letting their eyes linger on sumptuously dressed people, on furniture, fine carriages and worldly fashions. Thoughts turn to pleasure, to society, to vanities, if eyes turn too freely to this sort of thing....(97-98).

The main thrust of these guidelines is linked with that fundamental plank of the Spiritan spirituality, namely striving after that purity of heart of which Mary is the example in order to prepare themselves for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They were not to allow themselves to be victims of sheer surprise but to be in possession of their souls. This self-discipline, the control of the eyes, movements and thoughts in order to be more present to one's inner self and more aware of one's neighbour's needs underpinned also the guidelines laid down for behaviour at such a mundane occupation as dining together. It was at meals that the animal instincts were most in evidence and so the dining room was an obvious arena in the great battle against acting out of mere instinct. The communal silence, the public reading and the guidelines in etiquette were all geared to achieving self-discipline in thought and action. This was an area where Claude felt he had to be specific in his language, and at times he seems to be referring to particular abuses that were very familiar to himself and his audience:

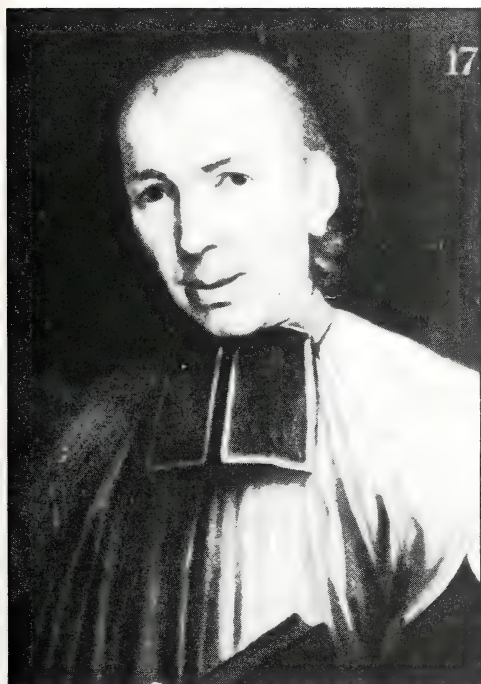
Everyone shall cut his bread and meat as good manners and mortification dictate and not as pleasure would have one do (76). In the refectory everyone shall pull his hat down a little over his eyes so as to eat more modestly and to profit better from the reading. Elbows should not be placed on the table; at most the wrists shall rest there. When one has finished eating, he shall remain in his place without shifting from side to side. Care must be taken never to make faces anywhere, so as to make others laugh. (100-103). During meals, only a very gentle knock should be used to request what is needed, and if it is necessary to speak to the person serving, it should be done so quietly that the refectory is not disturbed. (121).



James Garnier
superior 1709-10



Simon Gourdan
Canon Regular of St. Victor's Abbey



Peter Caris
The poor priest of Paris



Allenou de la Ville Angevin

STUDENTS WHO LATER SERVED AS DIRECTORS

Silence and the avoidance of all unnecessary noise features clearly in Claude's concept of the ambience best suited to interiorising one's thoughts. This was of course part of the monastic tradition taken over by the new religious orders and houses of formation. But silence for Claude was not a mere absence of noise, a dead silence. It was meant to be an act of consideration for others as well as the best means of being present to one's deeper self. This theme comes through in several of his directives about life throughout the house:

The least noise should be made anywhere. No matter what we are doing, or what permission we have to talk to others, we shall never speak in a loud voice for fear of disturbing the peace which ought always to prevail in the house. ... Doors are to be opened and shut as quietly as possible. Out side the time of recreation, not a word is to be spoken while going up and down the stairs. (116-124).

It is interesting that in Rule 117 when urging against disturbing the peace which ought always to prevail in the house he uses the pronoun "we", identifying himself with the rest of the community, not as the one who is making the Rule but as one of the community who as a body should see that the faithful observance of the Rule in this matter is assured. One notices the same use of the pronoun "we" in Rule 256 where he deals with the signs of mutual respect that must be part of the atmosphere of courtesy always prevailing in the community:

Whenever we meet one another on the stairs, in the garden or anywhere else we must never fail to greet one another. 257: Likewise whenever anyone gives something to another or receives something both must doff their hats and give or receive with that politeness which a Christian upbringing should make us acquire.

The silence which pervaded the whole house was not meant to cut off the students from one another. It was in fact intended that the spirit of silence would help them to be even more aware of each other's presence and needs. No 238 reads: Everybody is to behave correctly towards others, anticipating one another's needs as the Apostle says, with all respect.

As to closer personal relationships it is of interest to see what Claude prescribes. We see him following the counsels of reserve which seminary directors of that era felt necessary to insist on, but even here we see the humanity and commonsense of Claude shining through in stressing once more the positive rather than the negative aspect of these counsels, advocating an equal tenderness for all.

16 Everyone shall be careful not to enter into too close friendships with any of his comrades. Of course, they shall have a tender regard for each other, but a similar affection shall be shown to everybody.

Recognising the reality that in human relations one tends to get on with some better than with others he makes this corrective remark. 259 It is good that it is never noticeable that we do feel greater affection for one than for others. Knowing too that tempers could become frayed during the students' simple games he made it the duty of a particular functionary (The Lamplighter!) to smooth matters. Rule 176 reads ..If someone gets angry during play, he recalls them to charity and gentleness.

As courtesy was to be shown also to all outsiders with whom they came in contact, those who took it in turn to act as receptionist were reminded of their duties in this

area. No 116 reads: The Porter shall leave everything to go and open the door at the first knock he hears. In speaking to outsiders he shall use a subdued tone of voice and keep his hat off in their presence.

That Claude was particularly conscious of the importance of dress is understandable. He had gone through various stages himself in the matter of projecting an image by the dress he sported. His being dressed in white during the first seven years of his life was the signal to all that he was specially consecrated to Our Lady. Later his dress was dictated by his family's social status and aspirations. Carrying a sword, apart from getting him into trouble, was the sign that he had designs on claiming noble status. Later he was known to have dressed as the *cavalier accompli*, the accomplished young gent. His major break with all that and his adopting a totally new way of life was made clear to all and sundry when in 1702 he donned the garb of the simplest clerics. But the fact that he had embraced Lady Poverty as his bride did not mean that he became careless as to how he dressed. One of the means he used to get the students to have respect for themselves and for others was by making them conscious of the significance of their manner of dress; he stressed the importance of tidiness, cleanliness and the effect on others of the quality of one's clothing. His simple directives in this matter read as follows:

Everyone shall be careful to keep his clothing always buttoned from top to bottom. Hats should be such that they stay in place without braid. They are not to be worn on the side of the head. Expensive hats are forbidden. Velvet breeches, even if they are black, should not be worn because such ornamentation is a little unbecoming in our case. We recommend great personal cleanliness. Very poor clothes can be clean. (104-113).

Wigs were considered part of the normal wear still in the 18th century, even for the clergy. Obviously Claude did not approve of them, but again he shows his humanity by his ruling in their regard: If anyone has absolutely to wear a wig, let it be one that is as ordinary as possible. (106).

There is just one case where Claude feels he has to be adamant in drawing the line: 114 No one at all may be permitted to have a snuff-box or take snuff. That particular ruling in various seminaries presented some aspirants with a greater challenge than celibacy!

Modesty or propriety in behaviour and speech are topics which Claude felt he had to stress for young men who could be rather remiss in such matters. He specifically singles out for censure such habits as tasteless jokes, vulgar proverbs, the use of nicknames. The norms of the 18th century were more strict in restraining people from dressing and undressing in full view of others. The days of toggling out for sports and games had not yet arrived, so we have to alter our perspective somewhat as we read Rule 99: Others should never be touched except when charity or genuine good manners make it necessary. Let those handling games that often finish in trouble be far from us. One feels that rugby, had it been invented, would have been ruled out just as it was to be forbidden by French superiors in Ireland as late as two hundred years after Claude had composed his Rule. Rule 108 reminds us very forcibly, however, that Claude was prescribing norms of behaviour for a very different era; it reads: No one shall ever leave his room wearing a night cap, no matter where he has to go.

For Claude, cleanliness was next to Godliness not merely for the Sacristan, (148-50) but throughout the house, more especially in the dining room and for one's personal toilet (148,150). Hygienic habits were of such importance in the

days before methods of sanitation were revolutionised, but one can be sure that Claude's own family upbringing in this domain made him particularly sensitive to the necessity of insisting on a very high standard of cleanliness for these young men from a different background. We find him for example repeating in various situations the words "very clean" and directing that the water for washing the kitchen utensils should be "very hot". So this is one of the areas where Claude deals not merely with general ideals but descends into precise details.

It is in the section of the Rule outlining the special duties of the various functionaries that we see Claude at his practical best. As we read over the directions given to The Supervisor of Cleanliness and his Assistant we learn not merely the particular chores they had to attend to but, reading between the lines as it were, we get a reminder of the untutored young men Claude had to train to habits of hygiene in their personal toilet, wardrobe and living quarters:

The supervisor of Cleanliness does inspection of the rooms ... to see that they are being kept clean ... He must not permit old clothes to be left about on the beds or old shoes in the rooms. He shall look between the mattress and the pallet to see that there are no old shirts and other similar things there. He shall oblige everyone to have his own coat-hanger and a trunk to put away what belongs to him .. He shall never allow any accumulation of dirt to pile up in the bedrooms. Once everyday he shall have the cook and the tailor sweep the refectory, the kitchen and the bedrooms .. It shall be his responsibility to see that cleanliness is maintained where shoes are put away before coming into the house. The assistant Superior of Cleanliness shall make the rounds every Sunday to see that everyone has taken a clean shirt and handkerchief. He shall have everyone show him his Rosary, his Book of Hours, writing-set, combs and brushes. He is to note carefully whatever anybody may be lacking. (Article Eleven).

These sections of the Rule dealing with the specific duties of the various functionaries (some twenty of them) were of vital importance for the smooth running of the house, but they were also serving as part of the training being afforded to the future pastors who would in time have to be responsible for the running, maintenance, hygiene, economy etc of the premises under their care. It is quite likely that these portions of the Rule owe much to the customaries or guidelines for functionaries in Collège Louis le Grand and other neighbouring seminaries. One does not expect that Claude should have thought up all these detailed instructions in such a short space of time, but apart from the fact that the whole Rule, as we have it, is transcribed in Claude's own hand, we are left with the clear impression that he was drafting a Rule for their own particular house and circumstances. And there is clear evidence that this Rule was not merely closely followed down the years but it was realised that it was the Rule composed by the Founder. This is emphasised by the words which were written, presumably by Fr. Bouic, at the end of the Rule:

All these Rules were drawn up by the late Monsieur Des Places and written in his own hand. And he and his students lived by them.

THE SPIRITUAL CORE

What was distinctive about Claude's work? It was a seminary devoted to the education of poor or disadvantaged students who felt they had a genuine vocation

to the priesthood. There were several institutions in France devoted to such work, some of them predating Claude's foundation. Most of these ceased to exist once their founder was no longer there to give the sustained support that such undertakings demanded, but at least two such seminaries were still in operation right up to the Revolution. Claude's seminary, as we have seen, was distinctive in that it had merited a reputation for its orthodoxy, its standard of studies, its opposition to Jansenism; above all for its loyalty to Rome in the midst of a church sympathetic to Gallicanism. It was also distinctive in that its alumni were meant to opt on principle to serve in the more demanding and less remunerative pastoral posts. This in time naturally led many of their members to volunteer for service in the foreign missions. It has been claimed for these alumni of Claude's seminary that the great stress laid on evangelical poverty and simplicity of life during their years in the seminary remained their distinctive badge through life. In other words the spirit which animated the directors as a group seems to have percolated into the student body to such a degree that they felt themselves bound to live by these standards in their priestly work later.⁸

All so far claimed is of course true and very positive, but what gave all these features a centre and a soul was that Claude's foundation was not merely aiming at being a good seminary setting out to form young men in the traditional and solidly orthodox spirituality of the Catholic Church. It claimed to have something very special. That something was its own spirituality, and that spirituality stemmed from and was encapsulated in its official dedication. It was in fact a community deliberately and manifestly dedicated to the Holy Spirit and it was conscious of having been in a very special way put under the protection of Mary in her particular title of Mary Immaculate and Spouse of the Spirit. There is no doubt that this spiritual core was cherished as an integral part of its heritage down the years. This living tradition at the seminary was in itself a witness to the conviction that the original dedication on Pentecost Sunday 1703 had been no mere nominal exercise or that the day had been accidentally chosen. It was no mere nostalgic exercise recalling that their initial dedication took place on Pentecost Sunday and at a shrine of Our Lady. The feast of Pentecost had been specially picked as the founding day, and the ceremony was deliberately held at the shrine of Our Lady where the students had been in the habit of praying so often as individuals. The date and the place of the launch or birth of their little community had been specially chosen by Claude for very good reasons and he saw to it that this initial dedication was enshrined in the Rule of life which he set about drafting for his adopted family of fellow students.

For Claude and for his Jesuit friends the particular titular chosen for his special undertaking had a very special provenance. It sprang from a rich tradition with its roots struck deep in the ambience he had known since childhood and mostly through his association with the Jesuit houses in Rennes, Caen, Nantes and Paris perhaps also at Rouen.

Devotion to the Holy Spirit is of course part of the Christian religion. The church is the principal external sign of the mission of the Holy Spirit. But it is a fact of history that awareness of the Spirit's presence varies from age to age. The 16th and 17th centuries saw a great awakening to the vital role of the Spirit in the life of the church and in particular the action of the Spirit in the life of the ordinary Christian. The Spirit breathes where he wills; this new awareness of the role of the Spirit took various forms in different places. The tradition that Claude was steeped in was of course the teachings and practices of the Jesuits, or rather the particular current of spirituality that owed its inspiration to Père Lallemant and which was continued by his disciples. Lallemant had taught at Paris and later at Rouen in

Normandy but it was Brittany that witnessed the full flowering of his teaching. The literary expression of Lallemand's teachings was centred particularly at Nantes; its practical influence permeated the whole province through the pastoral work of a band of zealous priests who preached missions in the neglected parishes in country areas. This form of pastoral work begun in a methodical way by Fr. Michel Le Nobletz had been strongly supported by a number of Jesuit priests imbued with Lallemand's teaching. The work of these missionaries, the name by which they were known, and the manual composed for their guidance, give us the key to understanding what Claude was now setting out to do. The name assumed by this loosely federated group of like-minded priests was the Congregation of Priests of the Holy Spirit. And when some of these priests were called on to take over the direction of the newly founded seminary at Quimper they naturally named it The Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The leading member of this association of missionaries, Fr. Le Grand, SJ, composed a manual for the guidance of these missionaries which was entitled *The Institute of the Congregation of clerics dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the title of His Sacred Spouse, the Holy Virgin*. (published 1667).

The purpose of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit at Quimper was naturally to foster suitable pastors who would continue the good work begun by the missions preached in the parishes, work which would otherwise be negated through lack of willing and suitably trained priests. A few brief quotations from Le Grand's Manual will help us appreciate more fully what Claude was striving to achieve through the methods of formation he introduced into his own seminary from the start:

Let them love spiritual poverty as the foundation of the evangelical perfection which they should strive to acquire, and hold in detestation not merely the desire for riches but even the appearance of such avarice...

And again:

Let them be far removed from all sentiments of ambition and let them renounce all desires to show off or to put themselves higher than others...⁹

So much for the general spirit which was meant to animate the type of pastors required by the demanding ministry of serving neglected areas in the church. We now turn to the twin dedications that were to serve as the two main planks of Claude's spiritual building. There is no written evidence that Claude was directly influenced by reading these authors or that he had taken the missionaries in Brittany as his models when he set about planning his seminary, but he could not have escaped being moulded by these influences during the years of his close contact with the Jesuits. What is certain of course is that he was very familiar with the Manual specially composed for the Assemblée des Amis and that spiritual classic was obviously impregnated with Lallemand's teaching. Put very simply the core of the Lallemand spirituality was total openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, the great model being Mary whose Immaculate Conception prepared her for this role of being the Spouse of the Holy Spirit for the work of giving the Son of God a human form, both in the historical Christ and his Mystical Body the church.

At this stage it will help us to appreciate what moulded Claude's thinking if we had before us one of the key passages from Fr. Champion's classic setting forth Lallemand's teachings:

The two elements of the spiritual life are the cleansing of the heart and the direction of the Holy Spirit. These are the two poles of all spirituality. By these two ways we arrive at perfection according to the degree of purity we

have attained, and in proportion to the fidelity with which we have co-operated with the movements of the Holy Spirit and followed his guidance.

Our perfection depends wholly on this fidelity, and we may say that the sum of the spiritual life consists in observing the ways and the movements of the Spirit of God in our soul, and in fortifying our will in the resolution of following them, employing for this purpose all the exercises of prayer, spiritual reading, sacraments, the practice of virtues and good works...

The end to which we ought to aspire, after having for a long time exercised ourselves in purity of heart, is to be so possessed and governed by the Holy Spirit that he alone shall direct all our powers and all our senses, and regulate all our movements, interior and exterior, while we, on our part, make a complete surrender of ourselves, by a spiritual renunciation of our own will and our own satisfaction. We shall thus no longer live in ourselves but in Jesus Christ, by a faithful correspondence with the operations of His Divine Spirit, and by a perfect subjection of all our rebellious inclinations to the power of His grace.¹⁰

The spiritual teachings of Lallemant as published in 1694 in Nantes would soon have become well known to all who were in close association with the Jesuit retreat houses in Nantes, Rennes and elsewhere. One such person intimately linked with Claude at Rennes and Paris was Grignon de Montfort. He was deeply influenced by this Jesuit school of spirituality as popularised by writers like Surin, Rigoleuc, Champion and Le Grand; and in his own idiom he was to extend this approach to The Holy Spirit, whom he calls frequently the Wisdom of God, and to His Spouse, Mary Immaculate. Though Grignon composed his classic, *True Devotion to Mary*, after Claude's premature death we can be sure that in their conversations at Paris in the days when Claude was occupied with the founding of his seminary, they discussed those themes of spiritual theology beloved of both. Again in the absence of any developed statements from Claude himself on the significance of the twin dedication he gave his work, we will not be far wrong in allowing Grignon to speak in his stead. We quote from the very first chapter of his *Treatise*.

God the Holy Spirit, who does not produce any divine person, became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. It was with her, in her and of her that he produced his masterpiece, God-made-man, and that he produces every day until the end of the world the members of the body of this adorable Head. For this reason the more he finds Mary, his dear and inseparable spouse, in a soul, the more powerful and effective he becomes in producing Jesus Christ in that soul and that soul in Jesus Christ.¹¹

Later in the *Treatise* Grignon deals with the absolute purity of Our Lady that made her totally oriented to the Holy Spirit, and the nature of the purification of heart that all others must undergo.¹²

It is possible that even during his student days at St Thomas' College in Rennes, Grignon may have been co-opted as a member of the Aa (Assemblée des Amis) especially when he was co-opted onto the group assembled weekly by Fr. Bellier at his own house. By process of osmosis Claude, then too young to be a member, would have been moulded to the spiritual outlook of the Aa through his contacts with Grignon and others.¹³ Be that as it may, by the time Claude was contemplating his initiative in 1703 in favour of the poor scholars of Louis le Grand he was very much immersed in the work and prayers of the Aa. As they approached the Feast of Pentecost he would then have been familiar with the following meditation published in their manual:

On the day of Pentecost and all that week I will open my heart to the Holy Spirit that he may fill it and take possession of it intimately, that he may be the spirit of my spirit and the heart of my heart. I will offer it to him that he may consume it as a victim with the flames of his love. This practice will accustom me to considering the Spirit of God dwelling intimately within me; he is a spirit of love, asking nothing else than to kindle in my heart the same flames with which he inflames the Father and the Son, and thus to abandon my soul and heart entirely to him, so that they breathe nothing more but the love of God ... To beseech the Holy Spirit, who prepared our Lady's soul and body to receive the divine Word, that he would dispose my soul by charity, my body by purity, for that ineffable union that his love seeks in the Eucharist.¹⁴

After this introduction we are in a better position to appreciate the full significance of the twin dedication chosen by Claude for his seminary. In the few carefully chosen words with which he opens his Rule we see him as it were nailing his colours to the mast before launching out on the deep:

1 All the students shall adore in a special way the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been particularly consecrated. To this they shall add a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, through whose protection they have been offered to the Holy Spirit.

2. As their two principal feasts they shall choose Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. The first they shall celebrate to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of Divine Love; the second to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity. Their piety shall be grounded on these two virtues.

The first thing that strikes us is that these words were addressed to the students. As yet there were no directors. A community would emerge in time and coalesce around this twofold consecration of the house and work. The words "to whom they have been particularly consecrated" refer in the first place to the initial act of consecration on 27 May 1703 which was still vivid in their memories. That consecration had been done by someone other than themselves: (*ils ont été spécialement dévoués*) recalling that the act of consecration had been done by Claude himself. But his initial consecration to the Holy Spirit through the mediation of Mary Immaculate was to be renewed personally by all and by the community on the patronal Feasts of Pentecost and of the Immaculate Conception. In introducing this biennial consecration Claude was no doubt influenced by the practice of the Aa to prepare for Pentecost by a special novena and four days were given over to preparing for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. There were certain meditations and prayers in their manual for both these occasions.¹⁵ The special act of consecration contained in their *Preces Diurnae* at the Seminary, and recited on these occasions, was understood to date from Claude's own time though there is no written documentation to guarantee that it was he personally who composed it. As this act of consecration directed to Our Lady spells out in some detail what is contained briefly in the first two articles of the Rule it is appropriate to transcribe it here:

O my good Mother and Sovereign, holy Mary, Mother of God, holy Virgin, gentle refuge of sinners, powerful comforter of the poor, my dear hope in this valley of tears, with a fervent and humble heart I have recourse to your clemency, asking you to help your servant to give himself, to consecrate and devote himself to the Holy Spirit, your most noble Spouse, in Whose honour, notwithstanding my weakness, I want to make an important commitment...

My good Mother, listen to me. All-powerful Spirit, listen to my good Mother and, through her intercession, illumine my spirit with Your light and warm my heart with the fire of Your love, so that, in this house consecrated to You, I may be able to accomplish faithfully all that is pleasing to You, all that has to do with Your glory, my sanctification and the edification of my brothers.¹⁶

To gauge the significance for the community and students of this formula which they repeated frequently, we turn to one of Claude's successors, Fr Warnet, speaking some 120 years after Claude's death. He was addressing the assembled seminary as they renewed this act of consecration on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1837, and again on the Feast of Pentecost 1839. We quote at some length from these two allocutions as they flesh out for us what they understood by the twin consecrations made away back at the start of the seminary, and they are also a document in that they are a witness to the living tradition of the fundamental spirituality of the seminary in spite of the many set backs and almost fatal wounds inflicted on it by the various political upheavals in France:

That consecration is an essential part of the spirit of our constitutions. The holy promises we make in it are like an inheritance from our fathers who have gone on before us. They were poor in the world's goods and wanted to be rich only in the gifts of the Holy Spirit which constituted their entire treasure. They have left us a witness to their pious sentiments in a formula of consecration which we ought to treat with religious veneration because it is a sort of spiritual testament from them. If children respect the last wishes of their parents to the point of feeling themselves obliged to carry them out faithfully, must we not feel bound to conform to the last wishes of our pious founders?

They consecrated themselves to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of Mary conceived without sin, and they offered us to them also. We could not possibly belong to a better master than the Holy Spirit nor be under better protection than that of Mary. So let us consecrate ourselves to both of them after the intentions of our fathers...

To be devoted to the Holy Spirit means to do everything which may be agreeable to him. Otherwise there is no true devotedness. One is devoted to a master only to the extent that one tries in every way to please him.

We commit ourselves to seek the honour of the Holy Spirit – first of all within ourselves – by a spirit of perfect docility to the Will of God, of obedience and perfect submission to the movements of grace, by a spirit of abandonment of ourselves to the plans of divine Providence. We must let ourselves be governed by the Holy Spirit, follow only his inspirations and resist those of the flesh. We must have no other affections or intentions but those which He inspires. We must place our confidence in Him and put aside all worries: "He is my shepherd, I shall want nothing". (Ps 22:1). To procure the honour of the Holy Spirit, we shall cultivate within ourselves the spirit of faith which will remove from us all human methods which are the main-spring of every worldly movement. We shall also cultivate humility, simplicity and a spirit of sincere, deep and interior piety that consists in self-abasement of a heart wholly devoted to God's good pleasure, in which everything is done for God and nothing for self.

In addition, we shall be disposed to fulfil another duty: as children of Mary and of the Holy Spirit, we shall strive by word and example to make them

better known, loved and served. We shall bring all our brothers to glorify the Holy Spirit and to honour His divine spouse...

In this way we shall walk in the footsteps of our fathers, convinced that this is the surest way to do what is pleasing to the Holy Spirit... May we be like them and inherit their virtues as well as their name. Thus we shall be able to call Mary our mother. We shall be her family, and the Holy Spirit will look upon us as her children.¹⁷

Having been thus reassured that the initial dedication of his work to the Holy Spirit and to Our Lady Immaculate had not been just a passing gesture but had in fact proved to be a vital ingredient in the spiritual life of the seminary we can return to take a closer look at the words used by Claude in that initial document which he drew up in the early days of his little project. With his legal training he uses words with economy. His legal knowledge also made him avoid words that could be used in evidence if he were cited before the civil courts under the terms of the 1666 draconian decree forbidding the founding of any religious community whatever without the Royal assent. A community would in fact evolve naturally from the nature of the work, but in the document he refers merely to Rules for the house and addresses himself to students. On the one occasion when the context influenced him inadvertently to write the word community he crossed it out replacing it by the word *maison* i.e. house (No 125).

Knowing that all Christians are bound to honour the Third Person of the Trinity he is faced with the problem of how to express their added motive for honouring the Holy Spirit because of their special consecration to him. The same problem confronted the Priests of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit when asked to launch the diocesan seminary in Quimper which they proceeded to dedicate to the Holy Spirit. Père Le Grand, in the manual he composed for their guidance, wrote as follows:

Considering the sublimity of their vocation and the degree of perfection called for by the priestly office, the Congregationists are convinced that they should not be content with practising a common devotion to the Holy Spirit but that it was very desirable that they should dedicate themselves to him and consecrate themselves to his honour with an affection and in a manner that is entirely special.¹⁸

Claude in his Rule limits himself to the very few words: "They shall adore in a special way the Holy Spirit". One can be sure that in the regular reading in public of the Rule and during the allocutions provided for in Nos 39 and 40, Claude elaborated on this theme of their special consecration. Unfortunately no record of any such allocutions by Claude have survived but we do have a valuable witness from this period in the Rule composed by one of Claude's students for a congregation of Sisters of Charity "dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary". The priest in question, Fr. René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, had not merely been a student at Claude's seminary but had remained on for some years as teacher of philosophy and theology, so he was perfectly placed to absorb the traditions associated with Claude. The Rule he composed for the Sisters of Charity of Plérin bears striking resemblance to the Rule composed by Claude and indeed the oldest account of the foundation of this society confirms that Fr. René Allenou "formed a regulation on the model of that which he had observed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit". A brief quotation from this rule concerning the dedication to the Holy Spirit will be of relevance here:

The Sisters shall honour as perfectly as possible the Three adorable Persons of the Blessed Trinity; but they shall have a special devotion to the Third Person who is the Holy Spirit, beloved of the Father and the Son, and whom they shall regard as their Father in a particular manner having been specially dedicated to him. They will look upon the Feast of Pentecost as the principal Feast Day of the House...

The best means to obtain from the Holy Spirit the graces one asks for is to interest the Blessed Virgin Mary, his dear Spouse, in their petition, so they shall have for her a very special devotion. They shall then regard her as their patron and advocate with the Holy Spirit, their Father; and in order to solemnise their continued honouring of her under the various titles and qualities attributed to her by the church and in all the approved devotional exercises, they shall celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in a very special manner in her honour.¹⁹

We now turn to what Claude's Rule has to say about the prayer life of the students, starting with the prayers related to their dual consecration. They were to realise that all God's gifts were to be prepared for by a spirit of prayer, but Claude singled out some brief almost ejaculatory forms of prayers within the range of the students and these were to be repeated at specified times. We get our information on this almost incidentally as he is dealing with some aspect of their daily work or common prayers. We have already seen that special prayers were prescribed before all periods of study namely the customary invocation of the Holy Spirit – *Veni Sante Spiritus* followed by the prayers to Mary, the *Ave Maria* and *Sub Tuum*. It is in this context, almost by way of an obiter dicta that we find him referring to Our Lady as the Spouse of the Spirit (No 30). This title given to Our Lady is very much in the tradition of Lallemand and had been greatly developed by Grignon de Montfort and other spiritual writers, in particular Boudon, who as a former member of the Aa at Louis le Grand would have been brought to the notice of Claude. But for the most immediate source for this title of Our Lady as Spouse of the Spirit, so far as Claude is concerned, we need not go beyond the manual of the Aa where it is repeated as a matter of course in such statements as "The Holy Spirit treating Mary as His Spouse communicates to her all the intensity of charity".²⁰

But the special prayer to Our Lady which was so dear to Claude and which he prescribes to be said after the public recitation of the Angelus at the three regulated times, was the "Per Sanctam". Rule 28 reads: "Three times a day all shall recite the Angelus, together with the prayer Per Sanctam, to preserve a great purity of mind and body". The full text of this prayer designated by its opening words is as follows: "*Per sanctam virginitatem et Immaculatam Conceptionem tuam, purissima Virgo, emunda cor et carnem meam. In nomine etc*". ("Through your holy Virginity and your Immaculate Conception, O most pure Virgin Mary, purify my heart and my senses.")²¹

This prayer was not composed by Claude. It is to be found in collections of prayers and devotions in honour of Our Lady. It is of interest that in the Bibliothèque Nationale we find preserved three separate leaflets with this prayer given under an image of Our Lady. Two of these images have the Holy Spirit hovering as a dove over the image of Our Lady; so they may have had a Spiritan connection, especially the one dated 1849 which bears a resemblance to the arrangement in the niche of the seminary chapel at rue Lhomond. Apart from being recited three times daily after the Angelus this brief prayer is also found in the Small Corona of Our Lady which was included in the manual of prayers for the Seminary.

The frequent repetition of this brief prayer was of course part of the programme announced in Rule 2 where they were recommended to pray “to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity”. The purity prayed for referred no doubt to the grace of continence so important for these growing young men who were seriously contemplating the obligation of living a life of celibacy in the priesthood, but in the context of their dedication to Mary under her special title of her Immaculate Conception, and taking into account the whole backdrop of the Lallemand teaching on purity of heart as being the normal manner of preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit in human lives, this purity refers principally to the removal of all sinful tendencies or human obstacles to the unimpeded action of the Holy Spirit. Just as Mary’s Immaculate Conception was intended to prepare her for being totally committed to the will of God with no selfish tendency in her being, so Claude wanted his students to pray ceaselessly to her for a share in her purity of heart.

Again in Rule 40 we find another brief prayer prescribed to obtain that purity of heart which is a prerequisite if we are to be pleasing to God. This time the request is directed to the Holy Spirit himself in fulfilment of the directive given in Rule 1 where the students were urged to beseech the Holy Spirit for a share in the fire of his Divine Love. The text of this brief prayer is as follows:

Ure igne Sancti Spiritus renes et cor nostrum, Domine, ut tibi serviamus et mundo corde placiamus. (Purify, O Lord, by the fire of the Holy Spirit, our bodies and our minds so that we may serve you and please you with our hearts renewed.

The image of a purifying fire as a preparation for undertaking the work of God is frequently found in sacred scripture, but the immediate context is St. Luke’s account of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost resting on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire. Just as the disciples were purified by the Spirit and given a share in the fire of his Divine Love in order to carry the good news as God’s message and not as a mere human exercise, so the aspirants to the priesthood in the Seminary were to pray with Mary once more for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And if there were still any doubt in our minds that devotion to the Holy Spirit was a distinctive feature of Claude’s seminary, Rule 31 should dispel such doubts. It reads simply and clearly: “All shall recite the Office of the Holy Spirit every day”. This more prolonged form of prayer had two purposes: to honour the Third Person of the Trinity and to call attention more in detail to his special mission in our salvation.

It would appear from a study of the original manuscript that what Claude had written was: “All shall recite the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* everyday”, and that it was his successor, Fr. Bouic, who changed this to: “All shall recite the Office of the Holy Spirit everyday and the *Sub tuum praesidium* etc”. The fact that Bouic and his council made this alteration in spite of their clear protestation that nothing was to be changed of the things handed down²² would seem to confirm that the recitation of this little office of the Holy Spirit had been introduced towards the end of Claude’s life even though he had not as yet inserted it into the written rule; and though no older document exists to confirm it we are justified in accepting the version of that office printed in the 1845 *Preces Diurnae* as being the one traditionally used in the seminary. Each ‘hour’ begins with the invocation “May the grace of the Holy Spirit illumine our minds and hearts”. The hymns and prayers are directed in the main to the Holy Spirit.

One notices that each time the prayer “Per sanctissimam Virginitatem..” is introduced a different title is used from the Litany of Our Lady after the words “O purissima Virgo Maria” – Queen of Seraphim, Queen of Cherubim etc. There is a

prayer directed to the Blessed Trinity reminiscent of the one composed by Claude but one notices a nuance in the title given Our Lady in the words "through the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary we offer our prayers, our alms etc."²³ This prayer may well have been reworded in line with the popularisation of the devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the early nineteenth century.

This brief office of the Holy Spirit, which has no special psalms added, runs into some twenty pages in the *Preces Diurnae* having special sections for matins, prime, terse, sext, none, vespers and compline.

As the alumni of the seminary would tend to remain faithful to the formulae of daily prayer they used over the years in the seminary it may well be, then, that, when they were commonly referred to later as Spiritans, this title had a deeper connotation than merely referring to the official name of their Alma Mater.

Finally to round off this section dealing with the twin dedication of the seminary and its influence on the spiritual formation afforded therein, it is fitting that we quote here the opening statement of the official Rule drawn up by the community which gradually developed from Claude's initial foundation. This Rule was composed when at last it was judged that the time had come to apply for official recognition from the civil authorities as required by the law of the land in France. The framers of this document, approved in 1734 by the Archbishop of Paris, were very conscious that they were but building on the foundations laid by Claude and this comes through in the opening article of the document:

The Society is consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin and shall therefore celebrate with special devotion the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception so that the hearts of all may be inflamed with divine love and that all may obtain perfect cleanliness of heart and body.

Its spiritual programme as a seminary has been summed up in these words:

to transform by devotion to the Holy Spirit the souls of teachers and students and to draw down into these souls the great graces of interior holiness without which the preaching of those considered most capable from a worldly point of view can produce little in terms of salvation.²⁴

A SEMINARY WHERE PIETY REIGNS

When Claude was trying to assess his own suitability for the priesthood in the light of his weaknesses as revealed during his Ignatian retreat, he expressed his confidence in the formative influence of a seminary where piety reigns and where one might imbibe a new life which would foster in him a gentle habit of virtue. That sentence may well have owed its inspiration to St. John Eudes first published work (Caen, 1636) where he treats of the influence of religious exercises in "communities in which piety and the love of God reigns". Now that he was in the process of creating such a community for others Claude was very conscious of the formative influence of exercises of piety and of communal life suffused with evangelical ideals.

All prayers and devotional practices have their important role in the spiritual life of the individual and of a Christian community but the principal Christian exercise in prayer is, of course, the Eucharist. It was in the communal celebration of the Eucharist that the early Christians discovered their own identity as distinct from their fellow Jews with whom they had continued to worship in the Temple. It was the Eucharist which would mould Claude's family into a real community

eventually, but that did not happen from the start. Hence the importance given in the early part of the Rule to other exercises of prayer in common.

When we set out to examine the Rule in some detail to learn what Claude has to say about the Eucharist we are left in no doubt that for him it is at the centre of the spiritual life and central also to his programme of formation for the young men who have committed themselves to his care as director. But what he has to say about the Eucharist must be seen from the perspective that he is still not ordained priest and that most of his remarks were written at the time when as yet Mass was not being said regularly at least in their own community – when all had to go outside to assist at Mass in one of the churches in the locality. And this, incidentally, brings home to us that as there is no sign that the Rule had been rewritten, we are dealing with a document that dates to a considerable extent from the time when Claude was but a clerical student and when as there yet there was no resident priest in the community, probably before autumn 1705.

We should not expect a Rule to contain a whole system of spirituality. The talks or allocutions given by Claude on Saturdays and Sundays on the subject of prayer (39-40), the spiritual reading in common where questions on the subject matter were asked by the Superior (34,39), the public reading of Sacred Scripture and abbreviated lives of the saints etc, had their ongoing formative value in this sphere. Claude would have been able to draw on his own vivid personal experience in the matter of prayer, asceticism and his developing relation with God. Then the eight day retreat preached by a Jesuit at the beginning of the school year would have set the tone in the seminary in a special way.

We have seen that the Eucharist was central to Claude's own spiritual development and we find evidence of this attitude in the Rule composed for the guidance of the students, particularly in the directions given as to what their behaviour to the Eucharist should be. The new arrivals would have needed a special catechesis in this area. Daily Mass going would not necessarily have been a feature of their life to date. Now they had to be accustomed to make this the prime exercise of their day. We can see part of this catechesis in various references in the Rule, not all in one section but under the various aspects of the life of the seminary. Rule 20, listing the principal daily exercises which must never be missed, puts the Eucharist at the head, followed by meditation, spiritual reading and the particular examination of conscience. All other exercises were held in their own chapel and when Rule 21 speaks of their having to make a visit to their own chapel before leaving the house in order to prepare their minds, this may indicate that they had the Blessed Sacrament reserved there and that Mass was occasionally offered in the house. Rule 36 deals specifically with the Eucharist for the first time. It reads as follows:

Assistance at Holy Mass with the greatest respect can never be too highly recommended. No one should ever miss Mass unless he is so sick that he is unable to leave the house.

Here we see Claude stating clearly and briefly what their major priority should be in life. We can be sure that in his allocutions he developed this theme with that persuasiveness which his biographer Fr. Thomas recalled with admiration in later years. Their external demeanour during the celebration of the Eucharist is a matter that the Rule could be expected to stress and this we have seen already in the section dealing with reverence for sacred things and places (Nos 88-92). In no 84 we find Claude recommending complete silence as they prepare their souls for the celebration of Mass in some outside church and prescribing that on days

when they received Holy Communion they were to spend a quarter of an hour in prayer of thanksgiving in the church.

When it came to making regulations about receiving Holy Communion, Claude had to be guided by the practice of his day. Daily or even frequent reception of Holy Communion was definitely not part of Christian living in those days for the reasons dealt with when treating of Claude's own personal rule of life. For his students now Claude regulates as follows in this matter:

Everyone shall receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist once a fortnight. All are urged very strongly to approach these sacraments even more frequently, subject to the advice of their (spiritual) directors (no 37).

A similar directive is in the Aa manual. Claude himself however, had been singled out in the secret Aa report for special mention in that he had been allowed by his director to receive three times a week.

There was no restriction on the frequency with which the sacrament of Penance could be approached in those days and it was taken for granted that one must always receive that sacrament before presuming to receive Holy Communion. In this connection it is worth mentioning that one of the minor changes introduced into Claude's Rule by his successor was to prescribe that "Every one shall receive the Sacrament of Penance once a week".

Claude set out to foster an atmosphere of prayer in the house throughout the whole day using the devotional practices and regulations then being standardised for seminaries – many of them having been borrowed from life in religious houses. Silence, as we have seen at some length elsewhere, was the all pervading ingredient in this religious menu. But then there were the fixed times for communal prayers at morning and evening as well as particular examination of conscience at midday. Recitation of the Rosary in common was also provided for as well as the public recitation of the Angelus morning, noon and evening. Then during working hours, when minds tended to concentrate too much on the problems of the moment, a functionary had the duty of calling on all to raise their hearts to God. The signal for this was the calling out of the words used as the Eucharist was about to enter its most solemn moment namely: *Sursum Corda*, leaving it to all to answer in the sincerity of their own hearts the response *Habemus ad Dominum* (Cf 34, 153). Once again we notice that a similar recommendation for students is to be found in the Aa manual (p.5).

Certain occupations of their nature tend to call forth earthy reactions. These in particular had to be salted, so to speak, with a positive religious motivation. We have already seen this in connection with the recommended approach to eating, but in the days before flushed toilets and other improvements in sanitation, chores like slopping out, especially for others, could be rather repelling. Claude with French realism in such matters does not hesitate to make clear mention of them in the Rule and reminds those entrusted with such chores in their turn to recall that they were participating in the ministry of service to Christ in his brothers (185/6, 190).

As one senses here again clear echoes of what is written in the Aa manual for the guidance of its members in their helping visits to hospitals one is prompted to enquire as to whether Claude encouraged the students of his seminary to help in hospitals as he had done so often himself.²⁵ There is no evidence in the rule or elsewhere that he allowed for such extramural activity. Though one should expect that he would encourage them to be active members of the Sodality of Our Lady. There was a home for elderly, infirm and less well off priests in the vicinity, the Community of St. Francis des Sales, and the fact that the director of

this community paid a visit to Claude as the news of his serious illness got abroad, might indicate that there was a close relationship between the two communities.

The custom of instructing the children of the area and in particular the little Savoyard chimney sweeps was still being honoured at the seminary up till the French Revolution; and at the time of the merger with Fr. Libermann's society it would appear that the students at the Colonial Seminary, as it was then known, had a strong tradition of being actively involved in catechetics and other pastoral work among the poor in the locality.²⁶

The infirmarians in particular, because of their close contact with those suffering from human infirmities, were to be particularly conscious of their duties as a service, and they were to try to ensure that their charges viewed their sufferings as part of the cross to be carried willingly and not merely passively suffered. They were to see that their patients did not miss Mass if at all possible but never at the risk of their health. Neither was anyone in the house to engage in any fasting apart from what was prescribed by the church. The only exception in that matter was the fast observed in the house in preparation for their big feast of the Immaculate Conception (68).

Most of what is so far prescribed was the normal regime in seminaries then and till recent times. There is one particular item, however, in Claude's programme which strikes an unaccustomed note, namely his recommendation that all should set one day in the month aside in preparing for death. This might appear at first mention to betray a morbid preoccupation with death, especially viewed in the light of Claude's own early death, but seen in its actual presentation and viewed also against Claude's balanced attitude to so many other aspects of life, his recommendation does not sound all that unreasonable even if unusual. We let his words speak for themselves:

One day out of every month shall be chosen for earnest meditation on death. The day before, everyone shall receive Holy Communion as if it were the last day of his life. The meditation on that day shall deal with death, and the particular examen on the order that one has to put in all one's little affairs at that moment. The reading that day shall be on an appropriate subject. However, the regular period of study shall not be interrupted nor shall the number of spiritual exercises be increased.

That day shall be for everyone's profit as it is intended if everyone carries out one's daily round as though for the last time in his life. Each shall retire that night as if he were entering his coffin, with the holy thought that perhaps he shall not see the morrow (No 43).

One may be tempted to wonder what the students made of this exercise as young people tend to find the prospect of their own death rather theoretical. We are not without some clue to the answer of this question. One young man, René Allenou, whom we have already mentioned, was so impressed with this section of Claude's rule that he inserted it from memory in the Rule he himself composed years later for the society of sisters dedicated to the Holy Spirit which he was mainly responsible for founding.²⁷ As to where Claude himself got this idea in the first place, we can only surmise. He may well have been a member of the Bona Mors (happy death) society known to have been run by the Jesuits in Nantes in connection with their sodality.²⁸

Claude's Rule was not composed at one session. There are parts of the Rules for particular functionaries which would have made little sense for the first students. They were a small group getting to know one another and gradually trying to

structure their lives around their studies, their meals and common prayers. The Rule as it grew was then as much a product of their situation as at a later period the community was guided by the Rule. And though the Rule fulfilled its function when explained and amplified by Claude, it is obvious that it was never restructured as it might have been once the community had become enlarged and organised in its own self contained premises. Claude literally had not the time to spare at that period, and in fact he was never to be afforded the opportunity.

The work developed not merely quantitatively; its very nature must have evolved in Claude's own mind. At first he was just providing a structured shelter for the proper formation of the few students whose desperate plight attracted his attention. He probably had no very clear vision of the nature of their final destination once they had completed their studies. In the early days Claude had toyed with the idea of forming future religious – generous souls who would be formed to ascetic habits and ready to embrace the strict life of a contemplative order.²⁹ Claude as we have seen had come to the considered conclusion that such a vocation did not suit himself. It could be that at this stage he had come under the influence of Fr. Simon Gourdan who had at one period left the Canons Regular to join forces with the reformed Cistercians under de Rancé. There is no hard evidence about this stage of Claude's thinking. The time came when, either as a result of his conversations with Grignon de Montfort or because of his own reading of the signs of the times, he decided to concentrate on the formation of future pastors, but pastors of a very special kind.

There are some indications in the Rule that Claude may have had the model of a religious community in his mind as he was writing. In one instance he had actually written the word religious where the context almost called for that term, but he crossed out the word religious retaining the word cleric (73). The main constitutive characteristics of religious life as understood in the Catholic tradition are the public commitments to the vows of chastity, obedience and poverty, together with a commitment to live in community. Regarding the commitment to chastity, that is also an integral aspect of the priesthood as understood in the church in communion with Rome. The public commitment to practising evangelical poverty and obedience together with community life are what distinguish the religious order priests from the diocesan or secular clergy. Claude's Rule lays great stress on the practice of obedience and poverty for his students. The practice of evangelical poverty was very dear to himself. He wanted it to be the hallmark of his seminary and we shall see that he had hopes that this would be a life long commitment by the products of his formation. Reserving this subject for a special treatment we turn first to what Claude had to say about the practice of obedience.

The quality of the obedience Claude set out to realise in his seminary seems more appropriate in a religious community than a seminary where students are in a sense just passing through. Indeed this must have entered Claude's own mind as he penned the words: "Nothing is more important for the well ordered running of the community than obedience" (125). When he crossed out the word community and substituted house it is taken for granted that he was seeking to circumvent the 1666 edict proscribing the formation of any new religious community without due authorisation, but the fact that Claude wrote the word community in this context seems to indicate that he realised that the model he had in mind in this context was a community of religious. However the main aspect of the obedience he was seeking to inspire was its value for the well ordering of the house and its educational cutting-edge in training these young men in the exercise of self-control, self-denial and self-abasement as contrasted with the spirit of self-assertiveness and an

overbearing manner in their pastoral life later. As we read his full statement on obedience we realise that it is not an obedience being forced on the students from a position of authority, a dictat. Claude is always conscious that he is dealing with people who are his peers and that the value of his Rule will depend on its being seen to be in the best interests of each and of all. We let the Rule speak for itself:

25. Blind obedience to the orders of those in charge is particularly recommended to all.

125. Nothing is more important for the well ordered running of the house than obedience. Nothing can be recommended more highly. It is a great virtue to submit one's own will to that of another in all things.

126. All therefore shall obey with promptitude and alacrity.

127. Care should be taken not to fall into the following faults: to murmur against what has been ordered; to show by gestures and tone of voice that one is not happy about obeying; to assume a nasty and surly air; to argue extensively about what has been ordered; to dispute sometimes even with the one who has given the order; to ask him for his reasons and to demand one that satisfies; to complain to one's friends about the harshness of the orders, etc.

EVANGELICAL POVERTY

Considering that Claude included a section on obedience in his Rule it may seem strange that he did not have a similar section on poverty. After all he had stipulated that none but the poor could be admitted to the seminary and though it is not stated in the Rule itself it was understood that when ordained they would minister among the poor by choice. Others who were providing seminaries for such students believed in maintaining a regime calculated to ensure that the students while in training were habituated to real poverty by the conditions of life in the seminary lest having got a taste for the good life they would be less inclined to opt for service in conditions of poverty later. Briefly, a regime of austerity was insisted on as a matter of policy. That was not Claude's approach. He saw to it that his protégés were well catered for and made feel children of the family; but he had certain regulations and counsels in this matter of poverty when dealing with various aspects of life in the seminary.

For instance when dealing with the subject of food his main concern was that the students were properly fed, as well as could be afforded in their circumstances, enjoying the same rations and the same service as the directors and the superior. There was to be no distinction in fare or service for anyone in the house except when one's health required special treatment. But he does stress that the students are to be content with the food set before them, that they are not to complain, that as they are all poor people they are to look on what they get as coming from Providence. He reminds them that Christ did not complain on the cross; so they too were to be inspired by a spirit of Christian mortification and avoid all signs of sensuality in their approach to food. This was a matter then of Christian poverty of spirit, not a matter preaching economy. He draws the line firmly at what he considers an attack on the attitude he wants all to have when he absolutely forbids any one to accept invitations to dine out in town. In this connection it is worth mentioning that many years later, when Fr. Libermann and Fr. Lannurien took over direction of the seminary in 1848, at a time when discipline left much to be desired, one of their first problems was to have to crack down on students dining out!

The only time Claude introduces the topic of economy rather than a spirit of poverty is in the special regulations for functionaries, especially the Bursar. There are clear guidelines on the care of all property in the house, and the Bursar is instructed to make his economies by buying at the best price.

When dealing with decorum and clothes, Claude's first concern is for cleanliness. He reminds all that poor clothes can be clean. But again he does have simple guidelines on the type of clothes which were not in keeping with their status as poor people depending on charity. No 105, for example, makes it clear that expensive type hats are forbidden, and No 112 reads: "Velvet breeches should not be worn, because such an ornament is a little unbecoming in our case". He obviously believes that wigs are not for them either but he tempers his ruling in this matter by adding that if someone feels that a wig is necessary in his case he is to see that it is as ordinary as possible. But he draws the absolute line at the use of such luxuries as snuff and face powder (No. 114).

Not a lot then by way of practical directives in this matter of poverty which might be expected to be continually stressed in their circumstances, and if this were all to be said on the subject in the context of the formation given in the seminary for poor students, one would feel that there was something missing. Indeed. A vital part of Claude's life and message would have been omitted.

Claude had been reared in an ambience where the accumulation of wealth was a way of life. In fact it could be said that Claude himself was the cause or the motivating factor in the pronounced pursuit of wealth within his own family circle. The driving passion of his parents in this matter was to provide their heir with a fortune of gold and a title of nobility. We have seen the story of his rejection of this proposed destiny and his romance with Lady Poverty. In that story we have seen some of the personalities and the factors which forged the chain of events leading eventually to Claude's opting for the priesthood, his rejection of the comfortable benefice or clerical posts secured for him, and his gesture of solidarity with the poor by insisting that his *titulus clericalis* should be the minimum required for even the poorest cleric seeking to be promoted to orders. It was understood that he had confirmed this total abandoning of worldly goods by taking a vow to live a life of poverty.³⁰

So far we have seen the negative side of his opting for poverty – the leaving of all in accordance with the Lord's invitation to the rich young man. He was shedding his worldly goods in order to be free to follow the Master. As he himself said: "I long for the day to be dispossessed of all I own in order to depend on Providence". Quite soon the Lord made it clear what he wanted from him personally. By nature and by special grace he felt he was called to help the poor, but not merely, or even principally, at an economic level. The poor he was to help were the hungry sheep who needed shepherds, shepherds who would be animated with a spirit of compassion and total dedication; pastors who would be in the shepherd business not for the benefice but as instruments of the Lord. To provide such pastors was a tall order, so to speak, a glorious vocation, but that was to be his charism. And not even his friend, Grignon de Montfort, could dissuade him to abandon this demanding vocation, entailing much personal sacrifice, and opt for pastoral work directly.

When Claude made a study of the counsels of those who had already been involved in the work of providing such pastors for neglected posts in the vineyard of the Lord – the message that must have come home to him was the one put so clearly by that other barrister who opted for the priesthood, M. Doranlo, whom we have met already. His message was that detachment from riches or evangelical poverty was the cardinal virtue to be aimed at by the good pastor.³¹ Again Claude

was bound to have as one of his models the Seminary of the Holy Spirit founded in Quimper by the Congregation of Priests dedicated to the Holy Spirit, and he would have been familiar with the advice given these priests in the manual composed for their guidance by Père Le Grand which we have already quoted:

Let them love spiritual poverty as the foundation of the evangelical perfection they should aim at, abhorring not merely avarice itself but even the very semblance of it..

They must be far removed from all ambition and renounce all desires to cut a figure in public or raise themselves above other people....

It is in such words as these that we see the real significance of the spirit of poverty being lauded by the spiritual masters of this movement to provide a supply of pastors who would turn their back on the spirit of the age of Louis XIV, with its stress on titles of nobility and university degrees, the hunt for benefices and the neglect of the poor and ordinary. What was needed then was a kenosis or emptying oneself not merely of material possession but of all attempts to lord it over others, a spirit of gentleness and caring for others based on a profound humility.

Claude found these ideals and motives for action put succinctly in the series of meditations given in his Aa manual. In particular there was the meditation for Christmas where in simple but telling terms was shown that Christ's first lesson to the world was through his practice of total poverty, of not making his greatness depend on the created goods which could have been at his disposal. Again the meditation for November was based on the Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". The lesson is once more underlined that even those blessed with an abundance of this world's goods are not to set their heart on them as their treasure but to be ready to use them in the interests of the needy; that the riches of heaven are exchanged only for the poverty of earth voluntarily embraced.³² Claude had left his great share of the world's wealth behind him before he had joined ranks with the Aa, but it was from then on that he learned that his special vocation was to embrace total poverty in the interests of the poor and to devote his life in the formation of priests who would minister to the poor.

There then these are the ideals which Claude might have been expected to put before his students by word and example; and by all the accounts which have come down to us this was the example he succeeded in giving his students not merely in the written Rule and in his oral explanations but above all by his personal dealings with them. One of these early students, René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, we have already met as the composer of the rule for the society of religious known as the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, a rule that follows closely Claude's Rule for the seminarians, incorporating as well aspects of Claude's oral commentary and his living witness to the spirit of the Rule. Père Michel, when dealing with the passage in René Allenou's rule where he gives directives for the superior in her dealings with aspirants to the society, set about applying the passage to Claude himself by substituting the masculine pronoun for the feminine and the word seminarians instead of sisters. The result is to put before us a portrait of Claude as remembered by one of his students of the period, a portrait confirmed in its essentials by other contemporaries:

In his duties as superior he will always remember to humble himself before God, recognising in his heart that he is unworthy of this charge and a greater sinner than any of his students. He will treat his students with great gentleness and humanity, regarding himself as the least of all. He will carefully study the

inclinations of each and their temperaments in order to be able to lead them along more freely...

He will always ask for the necessary enlightenment from the Holy Spirit and treat his students with such patience and gentleness that he will be able to obtain their entire confidence and win their hearts. He will take to himself that precious lesson of Jesus Christ: Learn of Me that I am gentle and humble of heart. Have a very high esteem for poverty and disinterestedness - preferring always to go without something than to see the students in need of it.³³

An example of how Claude dealt with one of his students is recorded by Jean Faulconnier, whom we have met previously as the first student taken care of by Claude. He recalled the incident as follows:

One day, a young man belonging to the community who had felt the urge for some four years to become a Carthusian, left the college, Louis le Grand, before the end of classes, taking his books back with him to the community as he had the intention of quitting in order to go and join the Carthusians. He happened to meet Fr. des Places who asked him why he had come back so early. The young man then revealed his plans. Fr. des Places instantly turned to the Lord for guidance. He then said to the student: "My friend, God is not calling you there". Seeing that the young man persisted, citing the long space of time over which he had given to reflecting on this project and protesting the purity of his intentions, des Places replied: "If this inclination persists for a few days longer I will support you in your plans". He then told him to return to the rest of class. That young man revealed later that never after did he feel the least inclination to follow that vocation.³⁴

In this simple incident we catch a glimpse of the young director who had studied his students' aptitudes, leading them gently but firmly along; above all we see the director who strove to keep a hot line open, as it were, to the Holy Spirit for guidance in such delicate decisions.

The third student who has left us his memories of Claude in this particular connection is, of course, his biographer, Fr. Thomas. He stresses the spirit of poverty that animated Claude's whole approach to life after his conversion, as well as his gentleness and consideration for the students:

He was often seen carrying home what he had bought, both in order to save something for the benefit of his students and in order to humble himself... Furthermore he welcomed these embarrassing experiences out of the best motives in a perfect spirit of humility. He often expounded those motives to his poor students and urged them not only to bear such humiliations with courage but to seek them out eagerly. He succeeded in convincing them. His words, and still more his example, made them conquer the embarrassment and timidity that are natural to youth... Claude humbled himself to the point of washing dirty dishes and even cleaning the shoes of his students. This was the rule he established and he himself set the example in keeping it.³⁵

When Fr. Thomas speaks of the influence of Claude's example on his students, he is speaking with personal experience. He and the other directors who took over charge of the seminary after Claude, had been formed by him, and the marked degree to which his spirit lived on in them is the greatest testimony to the charism and teaching of the founder.

One of the immediate directors, Fr. Peter Caris, who for over forty years trudged

the streets of Paris trying to collect sufficient to keep the wolf from the door wrote late in life:

I struggle as best I can to pay my debts and I have difficulty in making ends meet; the times are bad and alms very scarce and not very generous. But I do not complain of Divine Providence. I believe it is better for us to be poor rather than rich, provided we have what is necessary even though others would call this dying of starvation. I am content. Lord Jesus Christ, our Master, was content to live and die a poor man³⁶

The students of the seminary were well aware of the spirit of poverty and sacrifice which animated the directors and several of them are on record as having been inspired by these high ideals all through their lives in fields as far apart as China, French Guyana and Canada. Let us take a few examples of their witness to this aspect of Claude's teaching and example which was an integral aspect of the seminary he founded.

We could start with Francois Pottier. He was one of the students who was made repeat part of his philosophy course on entering the Seminary in order to come up to the required standard of studies. Later, when appointed bishop of Su-Tchuen in China, he took as his episcopal motto the words: *Ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputari*, Love to live unknown and regarded as nothing. He may have borrowed these words from the Imitation of Christ, but his choice reflects also of the traditions of his seminary days.

Turning now to French Guyana we find Fr. Lanoë writing back to his directors in the following terms:

When I had the honour of being associated with your house, I had then no dreams about my appointment or my retirement or any other temporal advantage. My one ambition was to co-operate with the work of God. If I were now to be told that I would have to beg for my bread at the close of my days it would not worry me in the least. Jesus Christ was in a different condition from mine; I would prefer the ignominy and the poverty of his cross to all the riches and honours in the world.³⁷

Another missionary, writing nostalgically to Fr. Becquet, the Superior of the Seminary (1763-88), had this to say:

I wish we here were of one heart and one soul and that we knew nothing of the unfortunate words mine and thine. How it is to be desired that we were like you, Fathers, living in a type of community with a bursar who gave each just what he needed and gave an exact account each year of receipts and expenses to all the missionaries.³⁸

An interesting confrontation between two former students of the Seminary recorded as taking place in the homeland, involved the spirit of poverty! The municipality of Saint-Xandre near la Rochelle refused to guarantee a satisfactory financial support for the Daughters of Wisdom, a society of sisters founded by Grignon de Montfort, who were engaged in education and care of the sick in the area. Fr. Duchesne, who was responsible for such arrangements for the sisters, recalled this community to their Mother House on this issue. The pastor of the Saint-Xandre had been a contemporary of Fr. Duchesne when they were students at the Holy Spirit Seminary. He now wrote to Fr. Duchesne complaining of this decision based on mere financial considerations:

You will recall, dear confrere, that the community of sisters at Saint-Xandre was one of the oldest of the communities of the Daughters of Wisdom, if not the oldest. You and I were educated at the Holy Spirit Seminary. We filled the function of porter together, we washed the dishes together etc. The founders of the Missions of Saint-Laurent (Grignon de Montfort) and the founder of the Seminary were the closest friends; they fostered in their disciples a spirit of disinterestedness, of poverty and of charity. Should it then happen that it is under a superior of Saint-Laurent, an alumnus of the Seminary, and under a pastor who had received his first ecclesiastical education at the Seminary that on a mere consideration of money, the oldest community of that society should founder?³⁹

Finally we conclude this section where Claude's heritage is seen to be alive and well long after his death with a remarkable tribute from Fr. Besnard, a former student of the Seminary who joined the society founded by Grignon de Montfort and was destined to become its Superior General:

The reader knows the purpose assigned to the young clerics gathered in Holy Spirit Seminary. Trained in all the functions of the sacred ministry and in all the priestly virtues through the careful attention and still more through the example of their wise directors, they possess a high degree of detachment, zeal and obedience. They devote themselves to the service and the needs of the Church, without any desire other than to serve her and be useful to her.

One sees that under the guidance of their immediate superiors and at the first sign of their will – but always in dependence on the bishops – they constitute a kind of military detachment of auxiliary troops, ready to go anywhere where there is work to be done for the salvation of souls. They consecrate themselves preferably to missionary activity both foreign and domestic, offering to go and stay in the poorest and most abandoned places for which it is especially difficult to find candidates. Whether it is a question of being exiled into the remote countryside or buried in the caverns of a hospital, teaching in a college, lecturing in a seminary, directing a poor community, travelling to the farthest corners of the Kingdom [of France] or staying there in an austere post, whether it is a question even of crossing the seas and going to the ends of the earth to gain a soul for Christ – their motto is: Behold, we are ready to do Thy will: *Ecce ego, mitte me* (Is. 6 v. XII).⁴⁰

*Louis Marie de Montfort grignon prêtre
missionnaire de la compagnie du St-Esprit*

Louis Mary de Montfort Grignon – missionary priest of the community of the Holy Spirit

The End of the Beginning

1709

NEIGHBOURING SEMINARIES

Claude's ordination, 17 December 1707, gave the seminary a new dimension. He was now father of his community in a special sense. The Eucharist is the heart of all Christian worship and life. To participate in the Eucharist being celebrated by the head of the house must have meant much for the students. Mass was said regularly in the house since their transfer to No 8 rue Rollin early in 1705 by Claude's boyhood friend, Michael V. Le Barbier, who had been ordained priest at Rennes the previous September. Later that year one of their own community, John Le Roy, was ordained priest. The presence of these two young priests wonderfully facilitated the task of organising and extending the seminary activities. Singlehanded Claude could not have adequately coped with all the demands on his time, especially as all their necessary resources had to be requested or begged for in the absence of any bursaries or guaranteed income. Many aspects of the life of a properly organised, fully fledged seminary called for constant attention to detail as well as a clear grasp of the general direction. The part of the Rule dealing with general ideals and community life had been worked out and committed to writing. Now there was the need for detailed guidelines for the various functionaries who were so vital to the smooth running of the house. In formulating such guidelines the experience of similar institutions would be very helpful. In his approach to the heads of such houses in the locality he was now in a better position in that he was no mere clerical student but a priest. That Claude did seek for guidance in the matter of drafting his rules and regulations we have it on record from Fr. Besnard who tells us that he "submitted his rule to men of great experience for examination and their approval".¹ As to the institutions approached by Claude we cannot be certain, but from brief biographical details that have survived we are confirmed in what we might have guessed, namely, that he was in contact with the major seminaries already operating close by in Paris, in particular Saint-Sulpice and Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet.

Though the Jesuits would naturally be Claude's first port of call, and it was solidly inserted into his Rule that they were to be the spiritual masters for the seminary, there were obvious reasons why other models would have to be consulted. The Jesuit way of life and their system of formation was not what Claude's seminary was set on imitating. There are certain areas in the Rule where he is obviously not following a Jesuit model. For instance, aspirants for the Jesuits would not be expected to have the pocket money available to pay for an extra ration of wine at table or pay for damage inflicted on the property of the house. Seminaries preparing students for diocesan or pastoral life would be the obvious places for Claude to pick up practical tips on general administration as well as attending to broad approaches in pastoral preparation. Saint-Sulpice was the senior seminary par excellence in France at this period. It catered not merely for the diocese of Paris but for the provinces and even overseas territories. There is a vast corpus of literature extant dealing with this seminary, its system, its alumni, and above

all its founder, M. Olier, and many of his illustrious followers as directors. This seminary helped set the standard, for better and for worse, for other seminaries in France and overseas in matters of seminary routine, liturgy, spirituality, devotional practices and artistic taste. Claude would have much to learn from this fervent religious nursery which had the solidity of organisation and spiritual reserves that enabled it to withstand the ravages of the political revolutions and rise from the ashes to carry the standard of priestly formation from one century to the next. It could not, however, be copied in all aspects of its system by Claude if only for the consideration that most of its students were drawn from a class in society who could afford to pay for their education and who expected to return to pastoral posts with stable incomes.

The seminary of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet owed its foundation and spirit to Adrian Bourdoise, the pioneer in providing serious formation for future priests as being the most sure way of reforming the clergy. His idea was that what a good novitiate is for religious orders a good seminary is for the pastoral clergy. He believed in a parish ambience during the training period rather than the seclusion from real life which was the approach in many other seminaries. Hence the importance of the parish church of Saint-Nicolas in his system. He tried to inculcate as well as zeal for souls, a gentleness of spirit and a concentration on the care of small symbolic things. Instead of providing a prolonged course in theological training he set out to provide a crash course in preparedness for pastoral life, a course in liturgy and in devotional exercises for the faithful. Like Saint Sulpice his seminary was open to the needs of the Church at large. Many Irish students are on record as having received part of their training there. Perhaps its weak point was its lack of centralised system which left it vulnerable to the onslaught of the Revolution. There was no revival for the senior seminary, but the parish church has remained a focus of active Catholic life. Today, incidentally, this parish church is a centre for the traditionalists inspired by the stance taken by Archbishop Lefebvre, a former Superior General of the society founded by des Places.

Close by rue Rollin were some national colleges catering for the special needs of countries where the Church was under siege, England, Ireland and Scotland. It was not to be expected that Claude would have had any motive for studying their rules or organisation. And yet the largest of them, the Lombard College, then catering for the Irish mission, had much in common with Claude's seminary as it had when under Italian management in that it was trying to cater for poor students who would later have to minister in areas calling for great generosity and commitment. Indeed had Claude read the charity sermon given by Fr. Bourdaloue, SJ, in favour of the Lombard or Irish College, he might well have thought it was outlining the conditions and the ideals of his own work.² The Rule, however, being drawn up for the college at that time (1707) by the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, would not have had much interest for Claude as it dealt mostly with defining the rights and duties of the student members and those who were already ordained before starting their theology course at one of the colleges controlled by the University.

Among the areas where Claude might have looked for guidance was the matter of how seminarians should dress. Clerical wear had not been standardised as yet. Wigs were accepted as a normal part of respectable lay attire in the days of Louis XIV. The clergy in general seem to have followed this fashion. Claude does not agree with their use by students in a seminary for the poor but he is no dictator in such matters. He just counsels moderation in the matter of style. And just as there was a brisk trade in the supplying of wigs, there was also an insatiable demand for

face powder among the student generation. The records show that Collège Louis le Grand had a surfeit of the commodity in all rooms. One can imagine that on arrival at the seminary many students would find it hard to give up this habit. It was one case, however, where Claude was adamant no matter what was the custom elsewhere; powder was out.

TRAINING IN RESPONSIBILITY

Among the more serious areas where Claude might have liked to find guidelines in the customs of other seminaries one might single out the function of Bursar. This is a key post in any institution but it was particularly important in a house depending on charity. His helpers were young men without any experience. In the first years all such matters had to be attended to by Claude with some guidance from his friend and supporter, Fr. Megret, the Bursar at Louis le Grand. Claude in his study of the talents and temperaments of the students would in time come to pick out the more practical among them to act as his helpers. Once Jean Le Roy arrived in October 1704 we can imagine that he took much of this burden off Claude's shoulders as it is on record that he was looked on as a man of promise in his diocese of origin while still a student. His reputation at Paris must have lived up to these hopes. So much so that the first act of the newly appointed bishop in July 1707 was to recall him to his home diocese for service there. This must have been felt as a serious blow by the community, particularly by Claude who was at the time preparing for his own ordination. They were fortunate to have the services of Fr. M. Le Barbier who had been already two years in the house and so was familiar with its traditions. His family background would have ingrained in him certain habits of mind which would have been helpful as keeper of accounts and supervisor of important details in the day to day running of the house.

As one peruses the 12 articles of the Rule detailing the Bursar's duties, one is struck by the frequency of the directives to be accurate, careful, exact etc., in all his duties, and to be present on the spot in order to oversee certain operations. He is to ensure that nothing is lacking during meal times and during the wash up after meals. Economy was not to be the overriding motive; the stress is rather on care of people. And this applies to the functionary himself as we notice in No 170 speaking about the duties of the Steward: "After breakfast he is to note the names of those who want an extra ration of wine that day... If someone, having put down his name in the morning, changes his mind during the day, the steward shall bring it to him anyhow, lest there be too much confusion".

It is emphasised for the Bursar that it is his duty to make sure that everything is kept very clean and that the rooms are to be properly aired; but it is also pointed out that windows are to be shut on other occasions lest the occupants be discommoded. Another revealing detail is that the Bursar is "always to be there in the kitchen when the food is being portioned". Claude's caring attitude is revealed in such small details as this directive for the Bursar in no 161: "He will tell the cook, in winter, to take the chill of the drinking water at all the meals". Claude may well have sought advice from other quarters on how things should best be done but one has the conviction that he is legislating to a detail for the welfare of his own little community.

The post of Bursar called for continuity of tenure. Some other functions were changed each week. This helped towards an all round training of each student, even if at times efficiency suffered. The list of functions was made out by the Regulator in understanding with the Superior. The names were called out in assembly and posted up so that there would be no confusion.

The post of Regulator or timekeeper, being of some importance to the smooth running of the house, could not be changed each week. Not everyone has the temperament required for the timing of signals which was required in a house where so many exercises had to be finely timed and where no one had the luxury of a watch. The Regulator's day began at 4.45 am; then he had to knock up all in the house greeting them with the traditional morning call "*Benedicamus Domino*" – "Let us bless the Lord". From then till lights out the community responded to his baton and all signals had to be given with exactitude. It is reassuring however to read that as he led his companions on the various outings he was directed "to wait a reasonable length of time for the students to assemble at the appointed place before he moves off". (141) One is not surprised that when it was discovered that a newly arrived student had the ideal temperament for this job, he was allowed to retain it for the rest of his years by mutual agreement. His successful performance was cited years later as a high mark in his favour. That he was no mere clock in disguise is proved by the fact that when Grignion de Montfort came to the seminary in search of his first vocations he singled out that student, James Le Vallois, intuitively as his first choice.

For each post there was always an assistant who was to be ready to step in when circumstances required it. This teaming up could prove a lifelong memory as we have seen earlier in the case of the two pastors who had disagreed about the recall of a community of sisters because the local authorities refused to pay an adequate stipend for their work: one pastor tried to get the other to alter his unpalatable decision by citing their friendship and cooperation as they filled the post of Receptionist at the Seminary and washed the dishes together!

Two posts called for a measure of professional expertise: cooking and tailoring. Claude realised that the health of his community would depend more on the kitchen than the infirmary, and in the days before "ready-made" clothes the services of a tailor were a necessity. We are not surprised then that Claude secured the services of a cook and a tailor. What does surprise us is that he devotes quite a sizeable section of his Rule to the duties of these two functionaries, over 400 words in fact. Still more surprising is that a goodly part of his instructions in their regard deals with their religious duties, and they were expected to perform certain other tasks that had nothing to do with their professional work. All this seems to point to the fact that Claude visualised these functionaries not as mere lay helpers from outside but in some way as part of the community. A clue to his thinking is perhaps found in the term used in another context, even though on second thoughts he subsequently deleted it. In Rule 73, where he states that it is unworthy of a true Christian to think too much about food and above all to talk too often about it and complain about it, he adds: "For all the more reason it is a lack of mortification for a religious or a cleric to fall into this fault". Obviously he was making a distinction between the clerical students and some other category that he can only class as religious. The fact that he crossed out the word religious later is understandable as if cited before the courts for having transgressed the law forbidding the founding of a new religious society without the Royal permission required by the law of 1666, this document could be quoted in evidence against him. When soon after there were several tailors and shoemakers living within the house one can imagine that the nucleus of a religious community was already there in fact if not in law. Rule 263 reads: "Since the new Rule now introduced specifies that all shall have their clothing and shoes made by the tailors and shoemakers of the house, journeys into town for this purpose shall no longer be permitted, for the Superiors shall take care to find for all in the house itself whatever they need". Whatever else one may or may not read into these words about the existence already of a community of

religious, it is obvious that the seminary had come a long way from its shoe-string existence during the first few months at rue des Cordiers.

No house of students or seminary can be said to be fully functioning without a library of sizeable proportions. Even though in the earlier part of his Rule (No 46) Claude had directed that students were to study only the subject they were supposed to study, that is philosophy or theology, and that only the prescribed texts were to be studied, it is obvious that a situation had evolved when study in depth, occasionally at least, called for a goodly supply of books other than the prescribed text books. And once a library had been acquired, courtesy of donors, this was a sphere of life where order and system was vital. Rules 145-7 put these matters very succinctly and we quote them here not for any original thinking they contain but because they help more than much other material to show how the seminary was by now taking clear shape:

145 He shall keep a complete record of all books entrusted to him for the use of individuals. He shall catalogue them in alphabetical order and for that purpose paste a letter and number on the spine of each book.

146 He shall record the names of those to whom he has lent books, indicating also the day on which they were borrowed. From time to time he shall clean the library inside out.

147 He must never lend books belonging to the house to any outsider.

All this sounds very familiar. Little has changed over the centuries! But as Claude did not make rules just for the fun of it, one wonders who might be inclined to come to this poor seminary to borrow books. We must recall that they were surrounded by a whole army of students engaged in study at the various seminaries and colleges that made up the main population of the Latin Quarter.

During the course of the Ignatian retreat he made in preparation for a choice of state in life Claude had written:

...You will ask the Lord to make you steadfast; that for this reason you will oblige me to enter a seminary where piety reigns, there to drink in a new life, creating in you a gentle habit of virtue... This of course would be a wonderful thing...³

One can imagine Claude at this stage reflecting on the progress and direction taken by the work that had started with so little promise and humbly thanking the Lord that he had used him as his instrument in the project of providing such a seminary for the little ones who otherwise would have had to fend for themselves in a cold and uncaring society.

SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE.

As Claude was engaged in the work of finalising his arrangements for the smooth running of his community and crystallising the details in the official Rule, he was not the only person in that area just then who had to draw up a rule for a new institution. St John Baptist De La Salle, the pioneer in providing schools for the poor through a society devoted entirely to this service, had been operating free schools in the parish of Saint-Sulpice for some time. Of late he had tentatively embarked on a new and ambitious project which promised to link his work with Claude's seminary. The story of this projected link with Claude, albeit through an intermediary, has some tantalising aspects. In particular it highlights remarkable

similarities between the life story and the work of these two founders who espoused the cause of those being neglected by the society of their day.

Fr. John Baptist De La Salle had relinquished a sizeable fortune and his status as canon of Rheims cathedral to devote himself entirely to providing schools for the poor. He embraced a life of poverty in order to be totally dependent on Providence for the material resources that would be necessary for that vast undertaking. He was strongly anti-Jansenist, a staunch supporter of orthodoxy in teaching and practice, was known to be particularly devoted to the Holy Spirit and a fervent devotee of Our Lady under the title of her Immaculate Conception. De La Salle's work and spiritual outlook then would have inclined him to be sympathetic to Claude's work and be favourably disposed towards working in unison with him in the implementation of a scheme dear to his heart for some time.

Progress was being made in the matter of providing schools for the poor in towns and cities in spite of opposition from the writers' guilds and other vested interests. It worried De La Salle however that the countryside was being neglected and that there was little he could do through the society of Brothers he had founded. He wanted them to live in communities but country parishes could not support such a community. Further, he foresaw that there would be the danger of the Brothers being inevitably drawn into parish life as the assistants of the clergy in the work of training mass servers, the choir etc. Though a priest himself, he wanted the Brothers to be a totally lay organisation and forego any idea of becoming priests. He even forbade them to study or teach Latin, which was a major consideration in those days. To fill the great lack in country parishes he hoped to train laymen to act as teachers who would be able to fulfil the other necessary functions in connection with church services etc. In other words, he dreamt of launching teacher training centres to cope with this need. He had already tried and failed. His most recent initiative in this matter was located in rue de l'Ourcine in Paris not far distant from where Claude and his students walked each day en route to Louis le Grand. De La Salle composed a Rule for the little community of students there presided over by Br. Nicholas Vuyart. A priest from Saint-Nicolas du Charndonnet, Fr. Descoureax, was also closely involved. De La Salle had hoped that the Saint-Sulpice community, with which he had good relations, would act as chaplains in the apostolate of the schools, but the superior, Fr. Lechassier, refused to co-operate. He felt such involvement was contrary to the spirit of detachment from the running of temporal affairs that they were trying to inculcate as part of their seminary training.⁴

De La Salle's work in Paris suffered two severe set-backs: the Brothers were forced by vested interests to abandon their free schools in the Saint-Sulpice area, and the training centre in rue de l'Ourcine had to be abandoned when the Brother in charge defected and claimed ownership of the house! A request from Rouen to take charge of schools there was accepted early 1705 and as the Archbishop of Rouen, Mgr Colbert, was then staying in Paris, De La Salle took the opportunity to discuss matters with him. As the oldest text of the Rule for the Brothers dates from this period it may well have been produced to submit to the Archbishop.⁵

There are two relevant points of interest that must be noted in relation to Claude at this period. It is remarkable that several articles in De La Salle's Rule for the Brothers, which was in fact the Rule followed in the training centre at rue de l'Ourcine, closely resembled the Rule being composed by Claude at this time. In places the wording is almost identical. This of course does not necessarily mean that one borrowed from the other. Both may have in fact borrowed from a common source in the locality; there is no evidence that Claude and John Baptist met on this occasion. One thing is certain, namely, that Archbishop Colbert had

close relations with the Jesuits who had two communities in Rouen, a college and the novitiate house where Père Lallemant had made his notable contribution to Jesuit spirituality.

And in this connection it is worth mentioning that in one of the documents connected with Claude in the Spiritan archives there is a curious error! Some scribe, when listing the dates of Claude's promotion to minor orders (Quarter Tense in June 1705) puts him as belonging to the diocese of Rouen whereas in the following insertion in the same hand dealing with Claude's promotion to the priesthood (Quarter Tense, December, 1709) he is correctly given as belonging to the diocese of Rennes. This may be just a slip of the pen on the part of the scribe, though it was more unlikely that the Latin versions used could be so mixed up, namely Rhothogamensis (Rouen) and Rhedonensis (Rennes). More surprising is the fact that no one ever attempted to correct this error. Could it have been that in 1705 Claude was seen to have some close association with Rouen, that he was known to have gone annually to the Jesuit house for his retreat and a rest or that he had been well known to the Archbishop of Rouen then or during his stay in Paris in early 1705? If either hypothesis were true, it might explain perhaps the similarities between Claude's Rule and that drafted by De La Salle and the subsequent association in another attempt in 1708 to launch a teachers' training centre. Rouen was of course sacred to the memory of Lallemant and his disciples.

After De La Salle's experience of failure in his effort to launch a teacher training school at rue de l'Ourcine we can be sure he would be very reluctant to get involved in another such venture for some time, much as he desired to see a supply of well trained teachers made available for country areas. Very soon however, he was presented with a proposal to get involved once again in a similar scheme being promoted this time by a young priest, Fr. John Charles Clement. Fr. Clement was then only twenty years of age but he was fired with enthusiasm about a novel and idealistic scheme of training neglected youths (aged 7 to 20) in a trade and requiring them after suitable tuition to teach other youngsters in their turn. Clement at the time seemed to have had no trouble about locating the required material resources. All that was needed was a suitable house and competent teachers. De La Salle hesitated to get involved even though he was enamoured of the project. He was given no respite by the persistent Fr. Clement. Eventually it was decided to approach Cardinal de Noailles for his approval. Approval was granted but the Cardinal insisted that as the modified project aimed at providing teachers for country areas the centre of Paris was not the most suitable location; a village on the outskirts of the city would be more advisable. A house was secured by Fr. Clement at Saint-Denis to the north of Paris but De La Salle was now pressed to contribute a substantial sum to the purchase, (5,200 livres) from a fund donated to him for the purpose of starting a teacher training centre.⁶

The next step was to enlist a suitable chaplain. Having been turned down previously by various religious communities, De La Salle knew he had a real problem on his hands. This was a special vocation and there was need for a guarantee of competence and continuity in direction. It was at this stage that he advised l'abbé Clement to get in touch with des Places and seek his cooperation. This would have been the first such offer Claude would have received of active and congenial work for his seminarians and priests. At the time, late 1708, apart from Claude himself there was Fr. M.V. Le Barbier, and James H. Garnier who was due for ordination at the end of the year. Much of the work of instruction could in time be undertaken by the seniors among the students and the practical experience was just what they needed, especially as Saint-Denis was not too far distant from

their house in rue Rollin. Rule 57 refers to the training given in the seminary for the particular tasks they might have to undertake at the teacher training centre:

Since ecclesiastics have the duty of instructing others, even children, the Superior shall designate one of the students to teach catechism to his confreres. He shall instruct them and they shall reply as if they were children.

This particular directive appears in almost identical terms in the De La Salle Rule.

Nos 202 and 203 in the seminary Rule read:

They are to teach plain chant to those who are in the house... They shall have their students prepare the antiphons, hymns and psalms which are to be sung at Vespers the following Sunday.

This then is the background of the approach being made indirectly by De La Salle when he directed Fr. Clement to discuss his project with Claude. Strangely, information on this incident comes our way by accident, as it were, in the life of De La Salle written by Fr. John B. Blain, who got to know De La Salle later at Rouen where Blain was pastor. Like Claude he had been a native of Rennes and he would have known of Claude since his childhood years. It would appear, however, that there was no great friendship between the parents of Blain and Claude because of a clash in business interests, and this may explain why Blain never mentions Claude or his seminary in the other memoir he wrote about Grignion de Montfort.⁷ Even in his life of De La Salle he mentions the link with Claude merely as an illustration of the great personal trials his hero had to suffer. We hasten to add at this early stage that his suffering on this occasion was not in any way caused by Claude. But let Blain speak for himself:

I do not know what made De La Salle suggest to Clement, after he had bought the house at Saint Denis, to join with des Places, a priest who was educating a number of ecclesiastics in his residence. He made him hope that he would find in that group men capable of directing both the training college and the children whose education he was interested in. Clement followed his advice and was charmed with Des Places when he went to visit him. They did join forces. After drawing up a plan for the manner of bringing up these young boys, they wrote out a memorandum which they submitted to the Cardinal, who approved it. Thereafter, in Clement's mind, the two projects – the training college for country schoolmasters and the school for young boys – were two separate entities. Some time after the purchase of the house at Saint Denis with De La Salle's money, Clement wanted to give him a receipt for the 5,200 livres which had served as the down payment, since Rogier, the legal purchaser, had refused to give such a receipt. However, this paper remained in Rogier's hands. Only when Clement began to have second thoughts did he turn it over to De La Salle in order to testify to the fact that John Baptist had indeed furnished the sum of 5,200 livres, the down payment on the purchase price of the house acquired at Saint Denis under Rogier's name.

As soon as Clement bought the house, he ordered the bailiff of the abbey to vacate the premises, and he gave himself no rest until the Brothers took over the place. They did so at Easter of the following year, 1709. Not long afterwards, they welcomed three young men, the first candidates for the training college. On Sundays and feasts the students attended the services

in the parish church of Saint Marcel in surplice and soutane. They remained in the house until the high cost of food made it necessary to send them home, but they were told that when times got better they would be called back.

To lighten the burden on that institution the Cardinal obtained from the Duke of Maine a written exemption from the obligation to quarter soldiers. The document was dated the same year, 1709, and mentioned that the favour was granted by order of the king. It also specified that the house was to be the residence of three Brothers, one of whom was to teach Gregorian chant. The purpose of this notation was to show that the premises were supposed to be used by the Brothers for the training of country schoolmasters.⁸

Fr. Blain, drawing no doubt on the testimony of De La Salle whom he had known personally, states that Fr. Clement "was charmed with des Places". Well he might. The particular project being envisaged, namely the training of poor young lads for the service of the poor and of the church, was exactly what he was expert at; in fact Claude was the best exponent of this vocation in Paris then. But he convinced Clement without much delay that it was not practical to combine the work of training boys to a trade which would be most useful in a city or town and a centre where students were being specially trained to serve as teachers and clerks in a country parish. These two works would call for very different training and accommodation. It was agreed to proceed first with the teacher training project and to draw up a set of rules for such an institute. The other project could be attempted later.

The memorandum drawn up for the Cardinal's approval would have been more than just a general statement of intent; it would have gone into some detail about the location, the practical running of such a community and its financing. One can be sure that Claude incorporated many of the rules and ideals that had been tried already with such success in his seminary. De La Salle could have been already well aware of Claude's expertise in this sphere and must have satisfied himself about Claude's commitment to the service of the poor and about his spiritual outlook before he ever suggested his name to L'abbé Clement. And it is obvious from Blain's text that Cardinal de Noailles was deeply impressed. Unfortunately the document submitted to him has not been traced. His one alteration was to have Clement change his plan to locate the work in the centre of Paris now that the declared aim was to provide teachers for work in the country.

This proposed link between the seminary and the training centre for teachers promised to be an ideal solution for both founders: De La Salle could at last have his dream realised of training teachers to do the work his Brothers for various reasons were not free to do, and Claude was being provided with a training ground for his seminarians and an opening for future priests, all of whom could expect to have to serve in country ministries. The Brothers would be in complete control of the internal running of the training centre and the rule would be substantially what they had already been accustomed to; the chaplains would come along from outside to offer Mass, hear confessions and instruct the trainee teachers in the areas that the Brothers did not wish to be involved.

But as happens not infrequently, what in human wisdom seemed to be the perfect match did not receive the blessing of Providence on this occasion. Many factors were to co-operate to scotch this seemingly perfect combination. The Great Winter and the famine of 1709, as mentioned in the text, disrupted matters early on at the centre. Claude's seminary was to suffer traumatic effects that year. It may be that Fr. Clement was unhappy that his scheme⁹ for teaching trades to the many neglected youths in the city was being ignored, but the main reason

for his withdrawing from the scheme was once again that for financial reasons he claimed ownership of the house at Saint Denis, refusing to reimburse De La Salle for the 5,200 livres advanced by him towards the purchase of the house. He even allowed De La Salle to be brought before the courts on a charge of having used a juvenile, that is one under the age of twenty five, to further his own property deals! This repeat of De La Salle's bitter experience of failure in trying to launch a training college for teachers meant that he took it as a sign from Providence that he was not destined to undertake such a project and neither did he.

It would appear however that relations between Claude's seminary and De La Salle's own institute continued. At least one of the young priests from the seminary, Fr. Adrian Vatel, is on record as having "served as chaplain to the Brothers of the Christian Schools at their novitiate house at Paris and Rouen up till 1715".¹⁰ Fr. Vatel then opted for service among the blacks in the Antilles. Having a problem about securing the required jurisdiction when he would arrive at his mission and for faculties to administer the sacraments en route, he called to the bishop at the last port of departure, La Rochelle. There he made the acquaintance of Grignion de Montfort who was conducting one of his missions in the area. He was persuaded to join forces there and then with Grignion and was destined to become one of the founder members of the society recently launched by him, namely the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit later to be known as The Company of Mary.

GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

After Grignion de Montfort had failed to persuade Claude in 1703 to join in the work of conducting parish missions throughout the countryside, he returned alone to resume his work. However, he had received an assurance from Claude that when the time came he would come to his assistance by recommending to him those among the priests he had trained whom he judged to have the special tastes and talents required by Grignion's demanding apostolate. In the meantime Grignion worked alone except for the help he received from a lay associate, Br. Mathurin Rangeard.¹¹ Over the years Grignion had worked out a special technique and approach for the work of conducting parish missions at which he had been such a success. As time went on he was convinced of the necessity for a special society of dedicated priest co-operators whom he would train in his proved methods and who would be willing to forego all other fixed appointments no matter how praiseworthy. He mulled over the precise nature of the society he wanted and began to draft its fundamental rule. When the time was ripe he knew there was one institution he could turn to for support and understanding and that was Claude's seminary. As he had concluded that there was no question of his having the time or opportunity to train his own students for the priesthood he knew he must depend on a seminary already in the field but one whose spirit was attuned to his pastoral and spiritual approach.¹²

The occasion when Grignion finally unveiled his plans at the seminary in Paris and produced his Rule took place in 1713. It is obvious from the account of his visits to the seminary on that occasion that he was already well known and respected not merely by the directors but also by the students. They had no difficulty in adapting to his rather egregious manner because they were aware of his genuine qualities. It was taken for granted by Grignion that he had a right to be favourably received, and that this seminary somehow was intimately involved in his grand strategy. All this seems to postulate a previous visit by him and that not so far in the distant past; certainly not away back in 1703 when none of these students nor even the directors could be said to have known Grignion personally.

In the official biographies of Grignon there is no mention of his having made the journey to Paris between 1703 and 1713; an absence therefore of 10 years. Neither is there any vestige of correspondence between Grignon and Claude. Grignon would have realised in 1703 that there would not be any priests available from Claude's seminary for the next few years. So there was no point in his coming all the way to Paris until he had his own plans finalised; especially as he did all his travelling on foot in order to imitate his Divine Master more closely. The only other visit to Paris for which there was clear proof in the records, it was thought, was in 1713 for which there is ample evidence. The fact that Besnard's detailed account of Grignon's life and travels seemed to speak of another visit was ignored in the face of other dates which were assumed to be true. Besnard mentioned that he got his information about this particular visit from Fr. Bouic who had been superior of the seminary while Besnard was a student there. As it was taken for granted from an entry in the 1734 transcription of the original seminary register that Bouic had not arrived in Paris till after Claude had died, it was assumed that this special occasion when Grignon addressed the assembled seminary on the subject of Divine Wisdom must have been during his several visits in 1713. However, a closer look at Bouic's dates by Père Michel has put it beyond reasonable doubt that he had been a student in the seminary during Claude's time. Indeed, Besnard had clearly stated that Bouic had been a student under des Places. He wrote "I was told this by one who became superior of the house after Fr. des Places and who had been his student..."¹³ To compound the confusion in modern times the key words "*et qui avait été son élève*" were omitted from the copy supplied for publication in Fr. Koren's edition of des Places' writing!¹⁴

Briefly, then, before transcribing Besnard's account of this visit, we add for the record, Fr. Bouic's real dates. A native of Josselin in Brittany, he had been ordained deacon in Saint Malo 22 September 1708. Shortly afterwards, he came to the seminary in Paris, most likely guided by his neighbour Joseph Hedon. On 28 August 1709 he received his dimissorial letters from the Bishop of Saint-Malo authorising him to be ordained priest by Cardinal de Noailles of Paris at Quarter Tense 1709. We now give Besnard's brief account of Grignon's visit and his allocution as noted down by Bouic:

He (des Places) was not satisfied with giving them frequent instructions. He saw to it that the most competent masters gave them their retreats. He grasped at every chance to have spiritual conferences. He brought to his community friends who came to visit him if he saw that they possessed the gift of eloquence. One can well imagine that his most intimate friend was not forgotten. I was told by the one who became Superior of that house after Father des Places, and who had been his student, that one day Louis de Montfort preached to them about wisdom and that he delivered a beautiful paraphrase of the book of Holy Writ which bears that title. He said:

I do not speak of the wisdom or prudence of the children of the world, but I speak of that supernatural and divine wisdom which Solomon desired so ardently, so persistently, and which was granted to him so profusely. I speak of the wisdom of the Gospel, which consists in becoming poor, mortifying oneself, hiding from the world and being humble in order to please God... I speak of the wisdom which Jesus Christ has taught us through his words and actions, and which consists in taking more account of poverty than of riches, more of the cross and sufferings than of the pleasures, delights and satisfactions of life, more of humiliations and disgrace than of glory, greatness and eminence. I speak of a wisdom which is so lovable that it alone deserves our



The Seminary at 11 Rue Tournefort



St John B De La Salle



Distribution of bread in Paris
during 1709 famine

love and heart, so delightful that it compensates abundantly for all pleasures of the senses, so noble that having it is sufficient to be esteemed and respected by man, so rich and precious that in the judgement of the Holy Spirit it is worth more than all precious goods: *melior est sapientia cunctis pretiosissimis* (Prov. 3,15). Yet this wisdom is so little known and still less appreciated by men of the world that they cannot even understand how there can be true happiness even in this life or how one can experience a happiness and ineffable joy in becoming poor and humble to please God. That is the reason why they despise this wisdom, disparage it, and treat it as foolishness and outlandishness. There is a mystery here which human wisdom cannot penetrate and which has been revealed only to the little and humble of heart.

"He told us to kneel down," said Father Bouic, "to say a prayer to God and ask Him for that divine wisdom of which he had just spoken. He recited this prayer in such ardent terms, with such radiant features and such sublime words that it seemed to us as if we were listening to an Angel".¹⁵

This visit, which according to one authority on de Montfort, took place May/June 1709,¹⁶ did not succeed in obtaining for Grignion any immediate reinforcements. There were none available as yet. Fr. H. Garnier, who had been promoted to the priesthood the previous December, was vitally necessary as a director in support of Fr. Michael Le Barbier. But Grignion must have felt that his journey was worthwhile. He had achieved what he had come for: he had made known clearly to the directors and the students what his plans were for his new society and he had indicated in precise terms the special vocation he had in mind, one in fact which in many respects resembled the approach to the priesthood and to pastoral life which Claude was already inculcating. And from what happened later it seems clear that Claude must have made with him a covenant of friendship and support. Later the successors of Claude as directors of the seminary would recall this close friendship between their founder and Grignion's society and feel themselves bound to continue it loyally.

THE GREAT WINTER

From time to time nature seems to depart from its normal predictable routine and reek havoc as if to show man how helpless he is. Prolonged drought, violent winds, severe flooding, intense cold spells etc., have on occasion been so disastrous that they have left a special indentation in the folk memory of the region involved. We have only to remember such events as The Big Wind, the Great Famine, Debbie, etc. in an Irish context. For France the winter of 1709 has merited the name *Le Grand Hiver*, The Great Winter. That winter was devastating at the time in the extent of the damage and deaths it caused and its effects were felt long after due to the critical shortage of food and the weakened state of the public health. Paris suffered more severely than the provinces. And to add to the effects of the natural calamity the interminable wars conducted by Louis XIV had at this stage caused the surrounding territories to unite against France and impose a food blockade at a time when its native resources were stretched beyond demand.

A few statistics garnered from historians will give us some grasp of the immensity of the cataclysm. The year opened with unusually clement weather. Then suddenly on the night of 5 January the temperature plummeted. Within days the rivers were frozen over. This lasted till 25 January when the thermometers rose rapidly heralding a sudden thaw which was the prelude to severe floods. Blocks of ice 2 metres thick were thrown on to the banks of rivers. When all places were suffering

from an excess of humidity the temperature nose-dived again reaching a record low, only to be followed by high winds and snow. Not till the early days of March did the crisis abate but by then it had left a trail of death and destruction. Starvation stalked the land. It was not merely the poor who died like flies. The ranks of the nobility were also stricken. A contemporary writer remarked that never did so many die in a time when there was no epidemic to account for it. Some 32,000 died from the effects of the cold in Paris alone and the hospitals were filled to overflowing.

The severe cold created havoc with food supplies. Cattle, sheep, rabbits and fowl perished wholesale from exposure and starvation. The previous harvest had been below average but now much of what had been garnered was destroyed. The armies at the front were given priority in the distribution of what food there was. The English navy was successful in blocking supplies by sea. And as starvation threatened, panic gripped the nation. There was the constant risk of revolt in towns against the forces of law and order as they tried to supervise the distribution of bread and as prices began to soar. The measure of wheat (*setier*) which sold for 15 livres at the end of 1708 was selling at 30 livres at the beginning of March and had risen to 67 at the end of September. The quality of bread available at Louis le Grand was to be a life-long unhappy memory as we are informed by a boarder at the time, Francois-Marie Arouet, later to be known as Voltaire.¹⁷ So we can imagine that the left overs from the Jesuits' kitchen at this period would have become less plentiful and of poor quality. Communities which depended on charity suffered grievously. In the absence of concrete details about Claude's community we mention a few details about how the food crisis affected the De La Salle Brothers. Blain wrote:

The provisions ran out completely and the charity which supplied them dried up. The community found itself destitute, and even without (black) bread, the baker having refused to supply any more without credit.

De La Salle himself wrote:

Here we eat black bread.... The Brothers have two ounces for breakfast and five for lunch... I have not the money to provide bread for the forty persons we have here.

Nobody died of starvation in his community but the terrible privations resulted in an outbreak of scurvy.¹⁸

Claude and his bursar must have been under great strain trying to beg and forage for their large and hungry family. One is not surprised then to learn that at least one of the students succumbed, René Le Sauvage, in fact, one of the two brilliant students who had been recently called on to defend publicly their theses at the end of the academic year at Louis le Grand. This first recorded death in the seminary, which took place 18 May, 1709, must have been a rude shock for the community and especially for Claude.

By that time Claude had received another telling blow. Fr. Le Barbier, his close companion since youth and his right hand man in the seminary during the past three years, was being recalled to his home diocese by the bishop, Mgr de Lavardin. It is not known if it was the alarming reports reaching them from Paris that influenced his family to approach the bishop to have him recalled, but the bishop took the unusual step of appointing him directly on 8 February as rector of a parish where there was a junior college. The Le Barbier family was well known to the bishop as one of them was official printer for diocesan publications. There is no record of Fr. Michael's reaction to his being recalled for this new appointment. He more than any one else knew what his departure at this juncture would mean

for Claude, and the fact that he delayed his departure till June speaks for itself. When he and Claude said their farewells as the diligence set off for Rennes they could have no premonition that they were never to meet again.

We have seen, according to our calculations, that it was some time in May or June that Grignon de Montfort called to the seminary. Fr. Le Barbier's departure would have made it all the more difficult for him to secure any immediate reinforcements. Claude was preoccupied with the problem of keeping the wolf from the door. As the supply of bread got more critical and the prices continued to climb, unruly scenes were regular at the bread market; so much so that no one would want to take his place in that queue were it not a matter of life and death. The problem of collecting supplies in the absence of Fr. Le Barbier must have taken up much of Claude's precious time and energy.

AUTUMN 1709

And yet during this time Claude had to give serious thought to the more distant requirement of ensuring a satisfactory alternative to their premises in rue Rollin once their lease ran out. He had taken out a lease for seven years, so he had two years in hand, but one presumes that his attitude at this stage was that if a tempting offer were to present itself he would opt for moving sooner rather than later. As rue Rollin was within easy reach of Louis le Grand and had many other things going for it, Claude would be aware that it would not be easy to find a suitable alternative where he could comfortably accommodate his whole family, now over the seventy mark. So when such a property became vacant in the locality and with a tempting figure on the lease, he decided to accept the offer. It is not known when exactly he first learned of the property in question being for re-leasing but a document dated 17 August shows that the owner of their premises in rue Rollin, Mr. de Cornailles, had authorised a new tenant to take possession of it on the Feast of Saint-Remi, that is 1 October 1709.¹⁹

The new property was not far distant, just a matter of seven minutes walk, along rue Rollin, then via rue Contrescarpe and another short connecting street, rue Blainville, linking rue Mouffetard and rue neuve-Saint-Genieve (rue Tournafort today). The new premises were situated midway between the two parallel streets Mouffetard and Tournafort, the approach being through a large coach door at No 11 rue Tournafort. As one entered the smaller door inset in this typical Parisian coach entrance door one was confronted with a rather long, dark tunnel, opening after some thirty metres onto a quadrangle surrounded on all sides by buildings four stories high. The larger building to the right and the one straight in front were to be the location of the seminary. A passageway led to a further smaller quadrangle flanked again with high buildings to which access was had from rue Mouffetard. That entrance and building, though owned by the same landlord who owned the seminary block, was leased to a merchant who operated off No 36 rue Mouffetard. The portion of the quadrangle flanking rue Tournafort, and through which the tunnel-like approach was constructed, did not belong to the landlord. This building had its section of the courtyard railed off in those days; today there is no such division of the artistically laid out garden still showing the location of the well from which all in the houses around the rectangle had the right to draw water. The Rule composed at rue Rollin spoke of two sources of water, the well from which water was drawn for ablutions of all sorts, and the fountain from which drinking water had to be fetched. One presumes it was the same at rue Tournafort.

This whole area of Paris has changed little over the centuries. Rue Mouffetard,

which today has its constant stream of tourists frequenting its old-time restaurants, cafés, antique shops etc, was even more romantic looking in the eighteenth century. Every shop and private residence had its own ensign hanging colourfully over the footpath, vying with one another in their poetic and antique titles, some secular, some religious. At least two of them contained reference to the Holy Spirit. The ensign displayed by the seminary's new landlord, M. Arbolin, was l'Escu de France, escu being the old French word for shield from which we get our word escutcheon. This sign would have been displayed over the entrance on rue Mouffetard and not on the building on rue Tournafort which did not belong to Arbolin. Across the street from the entrance off rue Tournafort was a gaming centre with the name: la Mort-qui-trompe. The total area owned by their landlord was about 1,500 metres square. The portion rented by Claude was to be at his disposal for the annual payment of 600 livres. This certainly seems to have been quite a bargain when one recalls that, for example, the annual fee for Claude as a boarder at Louis le Grand was 368 livres. The details of the lease governing Claude's tenure are not available to-day as it seems that the legal documents in the family's keeping perished in the fires which raged in Paris in 1871 during the civil strife in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war.

In recent years all this complex of apartments has undergone intensive refurbishment. The courtyard presents the attractive appearance of an oasis in the heart of the old Latin Quarter. This sheltered location provided a haven of peace also for Claude's seminary, cut off as they were from the noise and bustle of both streets by the flanking houses, but as to the condition of the premises they acquired so readily and on such economic terms, we have no evidence. The building had at some stage earlier been used by the Gardes-Francaise, a regiment founded in 1563 to defend the royal residences in the Paris region. One can be sure the place called for some modifications to make the premises at rue Rollin fit their needs. And whereas in previous years it was a matter for Claude to compose a rule with the house at rue des Cordiers or rue Rollin as his guideline, now it was more a question as to how best to dispose the rooms and amenities in accordance with the Rule as already written. The time would come for minor alterations in the Rule to reflect the contours of their new home. But just now order had to be imposed on chaos, allocating the available rooms for the various services. The large room to be used as their oratory would call for special attention; perhaps even for an overhaul.

One presumes work began on this major operation of transporting their belongings once the academic year ended. The months of August and September would then have been hectic. In the absence of Fr. Le Barbier most of the planning would have fallen on Claude's shoulders and we can be sure, as Fr. Thomas reminded us in his memoir, that Claude got involved in the manual work himself. At the same time he had to attend to the routine requirements of the seminary, interviewing new students, supervising their tests, arranging for the annual retreat for the new year in their changed circumstances and planning for the ordination of Louis Bouic come Quarter Tense in September. Above all there was the major problem of procuring sufficient supplies of food and fuel, etc.

THE HOLOCAUST

All this must have put an intolerable strain on Claude's physical and psychological reserves. When writing an account of himself in 1701 during the retreat in preparation for a choice in life compatible with his talents and tastes he spoke of the seeming contradiction between his delicate air and his near iron constitution:

I enjoy excellent health, though I appear very delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing makes me ill. As strong and as vigorous as anyone else, hardened to fatigue and work, I am nevertheless inclined to be lazy and easy-going, applying myself only when spurred on by ambition.²⁰

In the intervening years much had changed. He had tried to make sure that what spurred him on was no longer ambition for self-glory. He had tried earnestly to heed St. Paul's advice to the Corinthians: "Be ambitious about higher things". But there were other changes: his robust constitution had taken a battering, partly due to his own self-imposed mortification, partly due to an excess of work, but of late due to lack of sufficient nourishment and to the incessant search for provisions for his large community at a time when food was so difficult to come by. One thing we can be sure had not changed: he remained faithful to his practice while as yet in Louis le Grand, namely skimping on his own needs in order to share with those he saw going hungry.

Looking back at the days of his intensely felt fervour after he had decided to dedicate his life to the service of the Lord, he had written:

Of temporal possessions I had intended to keep only my health alone, so that I could sacrifice it to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after having set the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed the last drop of my blood for him whose blessings were always before my eyes.²¹

Now the Lord was about to accept this offered holocaust, the complete sacrifice of all, even his health. The time had come when his physical system began to crack under the strain. Earlier, when he had given signs of succumbing due to a spiritual crisis, the adequate spiritual therapy was luckily available. This time, when his physical powers began to snap, there was no suitable remedy to hand. September had been a very trying month indeed but what eventually tilted the balance is not related. One can imagine the Quarter Tense fast being observed rigorously at a time when what he needed was a tonic. Perhaps matters were precipitated by one of those cold spells that herald the arrival of autumn. Whatever the particular reason for Claude's indisposition, he eventually went down with pleurisy. When the seriousness of his illness was diagnosed he would normally have been removed to the La Charité hospital conducted by the Brothers of St. John of God for whatever medical care beyond the home care they could give in those days. Claude had made provision for such critical cases in his Rule (189). Unfortunately due to the aftermath of the severe winter and the persistent shortage of food, the hospitals were full to overflowing. With the lack of organisation which normally attends the reopening of the new academic year one can well understand that the new set up at 11 rue Tournafort was not calculated to cope with Claude's condition. When the news of his serious illness spread to the interested quarters, people began to call to see what could be done. By then it was too late. We depend on what details there are on Fr. Besnard writing many years after the event. He is obviously relying on an account by eye-witnesses, whether it be the missing portion of Fr. Thomas' manuscript or the oral testimony of Louis Bouic or Peter Caris, is not clear. We must be grateful to Fr. Besnard for what he has preserved for us and try to read between his lines for what else we would gladly know:

While Father des Places devoted himself entirely to the cares demanded by his nascent Community and exhausted himself by austere mortifications, he



Portrait of Claude on his death bed



In the catacombs of Paris

suffered an attack of pleurisy that was accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus which for four days caused him atrocious sufferings. But not one word of complaint and still less of impatience escaped his lips. One only knew that his sufferings were intensified because his acts of resignation were more frequent. His very exhaustion seemed to give him new strength to repeat over and over again with the holy king David: *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua, Domine virtutum, concupiscit et deficit anima mea in atria Domini*. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul is longing and yearning for the courts of the Lord. (Ps.83,(84))

As soon as it was known in Paris that he was seriously ill, a great number of persons distinguished by their piety and their rank came to see him: the Directors of St. Sulpice Seminary, of St. Nicholas of Chardonnet, of St. Francis de Sales. The saintly Father Gourdan, to whom he was bound by the strongest ties of friendship, also sent someone to visit him on his behalf. He received the last sacraments in good time and after having received them with full consciousness and in perfect peace of soul he passed away quietly around five o'clock in the evening on October 2, 1709, at the age of thirty years and seven months.

That was the holy and famous Father des Places, the founder of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris.²²

Even at this remove the shock of the untimeliness of Claude's death makes us involuntarily remark: "What a tragedy in the circumstances!" We can only try to imagine what a shock the death must have been for all concerned but especially for the students who had enjoyed the welcome security and his fatherly concern for each and all, but were now face to face again with a future full of anxiety. Claude had tried in his Rule and in his whole approach to living to teach them to take a positive approach to death as a reality they should prepare for in their own lives. The unexpected death of another, especially one as close to them as Claude was, would have taken them entirely unprepared.

As to Claude's own recorded reaction to imminent death we are not surprised that in spite of his total commitment to his great project for these young men, he looked forward to death, painful though it was, as the entrance to the joys of his Father's house. He had schooled himself over the years to facing up to the reality of death as a factor influencing the whole of life. Not merely had he set aside one day in the month to be lived as if it were his last but as far back as the retreat in preparation for a choice of state in life, he was deeply struck by the new found insight that one's death should give direction to one's ordinary daily life, that life seen from one's death bed gave a correcting perspective. We recall here a few lines from that meditation on death and even though the language is coloured more by a rhetorical mood than by experience at the time, these lines take on a new dimension in the light of his actual death:

This is the secret which I have been looking for and which I must cling to. I must keep reminding you, O my soul, lest you ever forget it. Remember your last end and you will never sin. (Sir. 7,40). What an excellent piece of advice.. I must live well so as to die well... In what condition do I wish to die? In the same condition as the one in which I live... Since I wish to die the death of the just I must live a life which is absolutely holy and entirely Christian... I am going to begin doing what I would want to have done at the hour of my death.. What austerities would I not want to have practised?

These were, of course, the words of a young man but his life in the intervening years as seen by those close to him show that he strove to live up to his resolution. The “great number of persons distinguished by their piety and their rank” who came to see him once the seriousness of his illness became known, came not merely because he was the head of a large seminary but because of the impression he had made on everyone by his personality and way of life.

The few named by Besnard are significant: the directors of the two major seminaries, Saint Sulpice and Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet; the rector of Saint Francis de Sales hospice nearby for poor and infirm priests; and finally that representative of the famed Fr. Simon Gourdan, monk of Saint Victor’s Abbey who, though he had bound himself by vow never to leave the confines of the community, felt that he must show his solidarity with this young priest whom he had learned to value so highly both for his work and his deep spirituality. Besnard’s list is obviously not meant to be complete. There is no mention of the Jesuits, but we can be sure that the authorities at Louis le Grand were very much involved in helping the students to come to terms with their traumatic situation and in advising not merely with the details of Claude’s obsequies and burial but with the continuation of his work. It was of some interest for the Jesuits that this highly successful initiative with which they were so closely associated should not founder at this critical moment for lack of support and advice. But they would have been there primarily out of respect and reverence for Claude himself who had been so closely linked with their society and its ideals all his life, and none more than they valued the man and his achievement.

One Jesuit we can be morally certain to have been there was Fr. Michael Le Tellier. As director of the Aa at Louis le Grand (1700-05), as rector of the college and later as provincial of the Jesuit order, he would have not merely known Claude intimately but would have been involved in giving active support to his major initiative. Recently appointed confessor to Louis XIV it may well have been due to him that a professional portrait painter was summoned to 11 rue Tournafort to do a sketch of Claude as he lay on his death bed clasping his crucifix. The realism and sensitivity of that portrait in oils makes up in great measure for the tantalising lack of other contemporary documents. As we gaze on the emaciated features of this highly gifted and generous young man who had already spent himself in the service of the Lord in the persons of the least of his brethren, we get a vivid reminder of what it cost him.

When this painting was being cleaned in 1959 by a professional company it was suggested that the artist may have been Jean Jouvenet who had done a similar study of the noted Jesuit orator Bourdaloue. At that time it was not known that a portrait of Claude as a student in Rennes had also been executed by Jouvenet.

One presumes that as the new seminary premises were in the parish of Saint-Etienne, the obsequies took place in the exquisitely beautiful parish church, Saint-Etienne du Mont, which was only a few minutes walk away. At that time one of the many side chapels in this parish church was dedicated to Saint-Claude but the chapel that would have meant more to Claude himself, and to his students from now on, was the Lady chapel at the rear of the high altar: it was in the shadow of that chapel that Claude was to be buried and where his mortal remains were to rest for the next hundred years. But there was to be no way of identifying Claude’s grave: he was consigned by necessity and by choice to the paupers’ common grave. In the early days when there was adequate space around the church there were individual family graves and a separate burial area for the clergy. With the extension of the church and the increase in the local population only the very wealthy could afford a separate grave. There were some among the

well-off who, as a sign of their solidarity with the poor, left instructions that they were to be buried in the common grave. Such a person was Charles Rollin, the writer and former provost of the University who had succeeded Claude and his community at rue Rollin. Among the famous men buried in the Saint-Etienne cemetery and to whom plaques have been erected are Racine and Pascal. As one reads through the list of other notable persons buried in the parish over the years one comes across the name of an Irishman, Rev. Dr. Michael Moore; he had been rector of the University of Paris the year Claude arrived from Rennes to begin his studies at Louis le Grand.²³ One looks in vain, however, for Claude's own name among these lists of notables who graced the parish and frequented the church.

In his meditation on death during his decisive retreat in preparation for choosing a state in life, Claude had written:

After my death what will remain of all that is earthly, what will the earth retain of what is mine? A six-foot grave, a piece of evil-smelling cloth, a coffin made of four or five pieces of rotten wood... Once I am no longer alive no one will bother with me any more.

After a suitable time the rotten wood and bones were removed from these common graves to make room for other burials. The bones were then stacked away in the receptacles known as charnel houses. Early in the nineteenth century the Paris authorities decided to close down these charnel houses having emptied them of their quota of skeletons. The bones were then removed to a new resting place in the catacombs of Paris – the caverns left after the stones to build the stately mansions of the city had been quarried from there. Claude's mortal remains then are lost among the millions of skeletons artistically stacked along those catacombs, each section named after the cemetery from which they were taken and graced with suitable quotations from leading French authors.

Claude would have been dead and buried before the news of his serious illness reached his parents at Rennes. We can but imagine the deep shock this news must have brought for his ageing parents, though they must have had fears for the worst at times as reports reached them about the alarming numbers of casualties in Paris due to the cold and hunger. They must have questioned Fr. Le Barbier about conditions in the seminary when he returned in June but at that time there would have been no particularly disquieting news to report about Claude.

A few poignant details have been unearthed from long neglected records which serve as faint echoes of the family's remembrance of their only son. Claude's father was an active member of the Mens' Sodality at the Jesuit Church dedicated to the Purification of Our Lady and his name appears quite frequently in the list of subscriptions made at the *assemblées* or weekly reunions. On one occasion we find him requesting that three masses be offered for the repose of the soul of the late Mr. des Places Poullart. These masses would have been offered in the Jesuit church of St. Thomas' College where Claude had attended mass so often in the past. A legal duty that Claude's father must have readily attended to was to renounce all claims to his son's estate.

Another detail that has come to light and which speaks for itself: on 15 July 1710, Henry Le Chat and Jeanne Poullart (Claude's sister) nominated a chaplain to serve at a small chapel dedicated to Saint-Claude in the vicinity of their chateau at Vernée.²⁴

Claude's father, who had been in failing health for some years, followed his son to the grave, 18 May 1712. He was buried in the family plot at the parish church of Saint-Etienne, said to be the oldest church in Rennes. This church was closed

to public worship in 1791 but has survived as a building for secular use down to the present day having been recently refurbished.

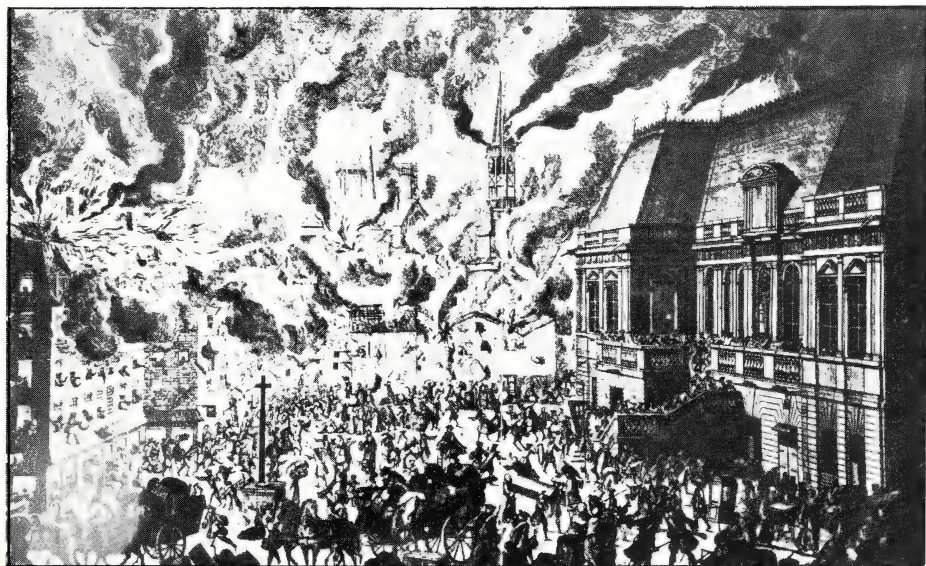
Sunday, 3 October 1718, that is the day following the ninth anniversary of Claude's death, his mother, signing herself as Jeanne Le Meneust, handed over her farm at Noyal-sur-Vilaine in support of the poor at Saint-Meen Hospital; the chaplains were requested to have the rosary recited with the poor inmates of this hospital three times a week in perpetuity for the intentions and the eternal repose of the benefactress and for her deceased relatives and friends. Claude's mother died 28 August 1720 and was buried with her husband at Saint-Etienne cemetery.

December that year (1720) a great fire laid waste a large section of the town of Rennes. Among the buildings which perished were the Basilica of Saint-Sauveur, the Hotel de la Monnaie and the large dwelling house built to the orders of Mr. des Places at the junction between rue Guillaume and rue de la Cordonnerie. And with the family home perished the many souvenirs of Claude's youth which could have been so valuable to his future biographers. His sister's husband, Conseiller Henry Le Chat, made the following declaration for an official report on the great fire:

We have managed to save only a portion of our papers from the fire.. those which have perished had got to do with the inheritance of Mr. and Mrs. des Places and their family and with the genealogy of Poullart. All that remain to us are a few documents about our own affairs...²⁵

Part of the inheritance of the des Places family was the Maison noble des Mottais, the rent for which had been assigned to Claude as his *titulus clericalis*. The bare legal document today merely relates that in 1720 the property passed into the possession of Mr. Le Chat.²⁶

Finally, Claude's sister, Françoise-Jeanne, whose death he almost encompassed in childhood when the gun he pointed at her happened to be loaded, was to survive him by fifty one years. She died 31 July 1760 in the parish of Saint-Évroult, Angers, where she was buried in the Le Chat family vault.²⁷



1720 fire in Rennes

From Des Places to Libermann

1709-1848

THE NEW DIRECTORS

Claude welcomed death as the entry into his fathers' house. For the house he left behind his premature passing was an unmitigated tragedy. Yet the fact that his work not merely survived the traumatic shock but lived on to realise his expectations was little short of a miracle. All the odds were stacked against it just then, dependent as it was on charity and now threatened with dispersal because of the near famine conditions prevailing in Paris. One can be certain that the supporting hand of the Jesuits must have warded off the almost inevitable closure of the seminary. Bereft of their father and leader the inexperienced students could scarcely have kept the ship afloat, much less keep it directly on course. But it is not fanciful to believe that though Claude's body had been consigned to the pauper's grave his spirit still lived on to inspire all concerned to ensure that his noble creation survived. The memory of his vibrant personality, the example of his heroic commitment and the solid foundations he had laid were no mere nostalgic legacy. All must have felt that they owed it to him to take over from where he had left off, knowing that with the same confidence in Providence which he had displayed over the years they could be sure of God's help. Claude's charism as seen in action over the past six years could not have been in vain. The men he had lived with and lovingly trained could be expected to do him proud once they had picked themselves up and sorted matters out – young and inexperienced as all of them were.

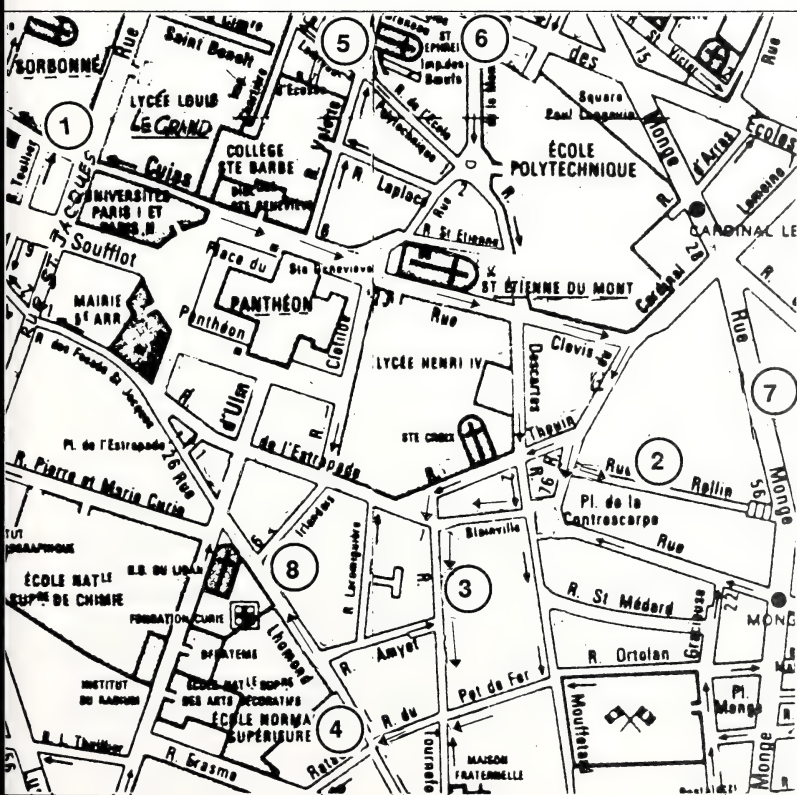
When it came to naming a successor to Claude there was little choice. If Fr. Michael Le Barbier had been allowed to remain on one could expect him to have been the obvious choice having been so close to Claude since their childhood. He had volunteered to come to Claude's aid at a critical period and had given over three years of dedicated service at the seminary, terminated only by the call of obedience to his bishop who had asked that he return for duty in his native diocese. But Michael was destined to follow his friend Claude to an early grave, within a matter of months. He died 22 May 1710 aged thirty years and eight months.

At the time of Claude's death there were two of the students who had reached the priesthood: Louis Bouic who had just been ordained, and James Garnier who had been ordained the previous December. It was inevitable that the honour and the onus of taking over the direction of the house should go to Fr. Garnier.

Like Fr. Le Barbier, Fr. Garnier had come from a family with close ties with Claude's parents. When he joined the seminary early in October 1704 at the age of twenty-two he had already received the subdiaconate at St Malo. Naturally he was soon co-opted by Claude on to the management team as an associate. In due time he was promoted to the diaconate having had his dimissorial letters issued by the bishop of Rennes 7 Nov 1706. Once ordained priest December 1708 he would have been more involved in the running of the house and his work load would have substantially increased after the departure of Fr. Le Barbier early in June. He would have had to bear much of the brunt of the aftermath of the Great Winter and would be in the thick of the task of transporting their goods and chattels from rue Rollin to their new residence as well as helping to get the house in order for the opening of the new academic year.



Louis Bouic, superior 1710-63



Map of Spiritan Paris

- 1 Rue des Cordiers
- 2 Rue Rolin
- 3 Rue Tournefort
- 4 Rue des Postes
(l'Homond)
- 5 Lombard Irish College
- 6 St. Nicholas du Chardonnet
- 7 St. Victor's Abbey
- 8 Irish College (1890)

To Fr. Garnier would have fallen the unenviable task of presiding over the crisis situation once Claude went down ill at the end of September. Decisions had to be made then that he was ill-prepared for. It was a rude baptism for one so young and inexperienced and with so little resources at his disposal. One can imagine him trying to cope with the stream of distinguished visitors, all of whom no doubt had their own advice to offer him. It was quite natural then that it devolved on him to try as best he might to take over where Claude had left off.

We have no information about what sort of person Fr. Garnier was. There is a portrait which professes to depict him, but how true to reality it is we have no proof. It portrays him as extremely young, boyish almost and fragile; not the sort of person one could easily visualise as being able to carry the weight of such a large community on his fragile shoulders especially as the food crisis continued unabated. Indeed poor Fr. Garnier was not destined to carry his cross for long. Within a space of five months he had gone to join Claude in the common grave at Saint-Etienne. He died 1 March 1710 aged but 26 years and five months.

This second death of the head of the house within a matter of months must have cast a gloom over the community and given cause for worry to all interested in the survival of the seminary. It would need something out of the ordinary to steady the nerves and to instil the confidence that was vital for survival. What was needed now was not a new charismatic leader but a strong, stout-hearted and practical administrator who could keep his head, pick up the threads, realising that a strong foundation had been laid, and try to get the others to co-operate with him as a team. Providentially such a man was available in Fr. Louis Bouic, the one priest in the community. So once again the choice was inevitable, and also unanimous. And in stark contrast with his two predecessors he was to remain head of the community for the next fifty three years, removed from office only by death. In fact even when there was the possibility of removing him from office according to rule, he was regularly confirmed every three years. That speaks for itself.

That Fr. Bouic got things going and kept up the highest standards all round is not in question. The history of the seminary tells us that.¹ But Fr. Bouic was always at pains to stress that the house was run by a team, a team of men trained by Fr. des Places, and that their aim was to continue faithfully in his footsteps. The main members of that team in the early years were, apart from Fr. Bouic, Fr. Peter Thomas, Claude's first biographer, and Fr. Peter Caris known as the Poor Priest of Paris. These three men in particular were responsible not merely for the continuance and development of the work begun by Claude but also for the strict observance of the Rule he had given them and the adherence to the ethos he had so carefully thought out and instilled in the community of students during his six years as their spiritual father. In addition to this routine work, if it may be so called, they were to preside over a number of major developments that were part of the natural evolution of Claude's work which only the passage of time could achieve: in particular we mention here the negotiating of the legal approval by church and state of the seminary and society, the composing of a rule governing the life of a society which gradually came into existence and was committed to continue the work begun by Claude, the acquisition of a new and more commodious location, the erecting of a purpose-built seminary premises etc. In particular they were to see to it that the priests formed in the seminary, Spiritans as they were generally known, went to the areas in the church at home and overseas where the duties were the most demanding and the temporal incentives the least enticing. In these concluding pages we deal only with the aspects of the life of the seminary which help retroactively to highlight the main features of Claude's own contribution.

The big events of the first few years of the new administration were the

promotion to the priesthood of the senior students who had been with Claude from the start at rue des Cordiers. Naturally some of these first fruits of the seminary were to remain on as directors, thus providing the staff required to look after the spiritual and material needs of the seventy to eighty students being catered for. Then there was the problem of locating the newly ordained in posts in keeping with the stated ideals of the house; not that there would be ever much of a problem in finding posts for such well-prepared pastors once bishops had got to know of the sterling quality of their training.

GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

One of the first fields opened up to the students of the seminary came courtesy of Grignon de Montfort. We are indebted to Grignon's biographer, Fr. Charles Besnard, for an extended account of Grignon's special visit which, apart from being crucial to the life of the society he had founded, was of particular interest to Besnard as a former student of the seminary.

Grignon had long realised that he must one day found a society to continue his special ministry of conducting parish missions. He was so busy however conducting such missions in Brittany and Normandy that he had not the time to concentrate on the problems of organising a society and looking for vocations. Now as Fr. Besnard informs us, having finalised his plans under God's guidance, God made it clear to him how he should go about achieving his purpose:

The first means he employed was to go and confer with his long-standing friends, the directors of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris with whom he had always entertained the close relations he had with Fr. des Places...²

Besnard does not give us any indication as to how or when Grignon had been in close contact with the current directors (June 1713), but whatever else he had in mind he scarcely could have been referring to the meetings he had with Claude himself away back in 1703 before he had actually founded the seminary: the directors in question had not been admitted as students at that time. As we have seen earlier a more recent visit to Paris by Grignon seems to be postulated, and we saw that May/June 1709 was the most likely date. Early Summer 1713, in spite of dangerous signs of fatigue, Grignon set off to walk the 90 leagues to Paris, passing en route through Angers where Claude's sister was busy rearing her young family.

When Grignon arrived at 11 rue Tournafort and entered the long, dark, tunnel-like passage, he found the community at recreation in the quadrangle, presumably engaged in the concertina type exercise associated with French seminary life in restricted areas of recreation i.e. walking forward so many steps until one met the opposing group and then walking backwards to where one started! Grignon must have presented a rare sight, sporting his very unusual large hat and covered with the dust from his long journey along country roads. He saluted all with a general greeting, looked around and singled out one young student who was very surprised to be honoured with an embrace from this unknown visitor. Grignon explained that he picked him out specially as he was the poorest dressed and that the poor must be given first attention! In no time the community warmed to him as a man of singular quality and learned to ignore his rather unusual behaviour. As Besnard remarked, "They revered him as much as the men of recent times who had been held up for their admiration: Fr. (later Saint) John Eudes, Fr. Honoré, Fr. Bourdoise, Fr. Le Nobletz and Fr. des Places their teacher and founder".³

Having received a very cold welcome from others he had visited in Paris, Grignon was naturally very touched by his being made feel at home in the seminary. As Besnard writes:

·The directors of the seminary were among those who remained always supportive of him. As the house owed its origin to the late Fr. des Places, his friend, they always had for him the esteem and the friendship which that illustrious man had shown him right up to his death. Such sentiments then were, so to say, part of their inheritance.⁴

Finding himself among friends, Grignon proceeded to unveil his plans for launching his society. All were deeply impressed by his plans and the directors promised him full support in sending him suitable candidates who would be ready to co-operate in carrying out his mission. Besnard tells us that

As a result of this declaration which both parties looked on as a sort of covenant he wrote there and then at the head of his Rule to serve as an introduction: There is in Paris a seminary, namely the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, where the young clerics with a vocation to the missions of the Company of Mary prepare themselves for entry while they acquire knowledge and virtue.

To seal this matter more solemnly he inserted a similar statement in the middle of the Rule, and in order to leave a perpetual memorial in the seminary he commissioned a special statue of Our Lady on whose fan-shaped mantle the images of twelve priests would be painted representing the candidates from the seminary who over the years would want to join his society. Besnard concludes his account:

This then, is the origin of the close link that exists between the disciples of Fr. des Places and the Company of Mary and the guarantee of supplying suitable vocations ... as the same spirit reigns in both communities, the same views, the same sentiments, the same zeal, the same spirit of poverty and abandon to Divine Providence, the same ardour for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.⁵

After a two months stay in Paris Grignon returned to his mission crusade, happy that he had achieved his purpose in cementing a solid association with the directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.⁶ The precise terms of their agreement have not survived on paper but from then on Grignon signed himself in official documents as "a Missionary Priest of the Community of the Holy Spirit".⁷ There were only two priests in Grignon's society by the time of his death, 28 April, 1716. At least two thirds of the numbers of his followers by the end of the century had come through the Seminary in Paris. It was not merely the young priests who opted to join Grignon's society after their ordination: several of the directors planned to do likewise. Fr. Caris, the bursar and bread-winner of the house, had his few belongings packed and was about to set off for Saint-Laurent, the only house owned by Grignon's society at the time, when he was requested by Fr. Bouic to remain at this post which was so vital to the survival of the seminary. As Fr. Caris directed the various students to Saint-Laurent over the years he invariably reminded them how fortunate they were and looked on them as his substitutes. Even the redoubtable Fr. Thomas joined the Saint-Laurent community for a time and dedicated the new premises there to the Holy Spirit. He too was requested by Fr. Bouic to return to his post as director at the seminary. The same year, 1724,

another director of the seminary, Fr. Joseph Hedan, asked to be allowed to join the Saint-Laurent community. Fr. Hedan was allowed to remain on there for the rest of his days.⁸

Grignon's community continued to be known as the Missionary Priests of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. At first the motive was to ensure the close link with the seminary which was its lifeline for vocations. Later there was an extra reason: to share somehow in the legal recognition and protection of the Seminary lest they be accused of having started a new society without the requisite legal permission. Several unsuccessful applications for legal recognition were made under the long superiorship, thirty three years, exercised by Fr. Besnard. Eventually he succeeded in 1773 with some notable assistance from the friends of the Holy Spirit Seminary and significantly the official title under which they were given their legal status was The Missionary Priests of the Holy Spirit!⁹

LOUIS XIV

Claude had achieved a delicate balancing-act in avoiding a clash with the 1666 edict proscribing the founding of any new community whatever without applying for letters patent and in conducting a large seminary without having to put it under the direct control of the Archbishop of Paris. He had his good reasons for so acting while his work was in its infancy and he was shaping its vocation as there were dangers that its very character might be altered against his will.

A time would come when Claude would judge it opportune to apply for legal recognition for the society that would by then have evolved to ensure the running of the seminary. For the seminary itself he did not require legal recognition but if challenged for not having taken out letters patent he would be in the anomalous position that he had no documentary proof that his work had been recognised by the competent ecclesiastical authority as a seminary. An obvious place where a problem could arise was if they sought to benefit from a legacy in their favour: they would not be entitled to claim it since they had no legal personality. Direct donations from the living posed no problem. Bequests from the dead could land them in dire trouble!

The seminary depended entirely on charity in the early years, relying on the generosity of the Jesuits' kitchen, on the donations from Claude's personal contacts and later on the success or otherwise of Fr. Caris' begging tours around Paris. Caris' normal takings would have been small but occasionally he did happen on a wealthy donor. Among those who befriended the seminary was Louis XIV himself. Towards the end of his days he took a personal interest in the work: he had plans to fund bursaries there and on learning of its lack of legal protection he had signified his intention to have that matter remedied. Unfortunately death forestalled both these good intentions.¹⁰

One is curious to know how Louis XIV had been influenced to take this special interest in such a hidden project at a time when his armies were faring badly and his own health was a worry. As king he had no lack of informers on all things good and bad happening in his realm. But with regard to such a work of charity and religion one can be sure Mme. de Maintenon was well informed. This was a realm in which she specialised and influenced royal policy. It is known that she was very interested in the progress of the teacher-training centre being planned by L'abbé Clement with the assistance of De La Salle and Claude. And being a close relative of Cardinal de Noailles she would have been informed of the status of the seminary and its plight after Claude's death. One wonders if as governess for many

years to Louis' children she was aware of Claude's having dedicated his defense of the Grand Acte in 1698 to Louis' son the Comte de Toulouse. But perhaps we are nearer to the source of Louis' interest in Claude's seminary when we learn that Louis' confessor at this period was none other than Fr. Michael Le Tellier, SJ, former rector of the Assemblée des Amis at Louis le Grand while Claude was an active member, and later rector of the College and Provincial of the Jesuits.¹¹ So the seminary had no lack of supporters at the court, it would appear. The failure, however, to achieve that more solid legal basis planned by Louis XIV was soon to be regretted by Fr. Bouic and his friends at the seminary.

One of the benefactors of the seminary contacted by Fr. Caris was a wealthy priest, Fr. Charles Lebégue (also Le Baigue or Le Bégue), who lived in the neighbouring parish of Saint Medard. We might have heard nothing of this good priest's generosity towards the poor students were it not that after his death the seminary learned that he had bequeathed the substantial sum of 40,000 livres to the Community of the Holy Spirit, stipulating that they were to erect their seminary in the parish of Saint Medard and were required to conduct specified religious services there for the repose of his soul. In the words of the Book of Maccabees this "was a holy and wholesome thought", but it almost encompassed the suppression of Claude's seminary!

SUPPRESSION OR RECOGNITION?

The contents of the Lebégue will were made known in 1726 and on the strength of the good news Fr. Bouic proposed to purchase a new site for the seminary in rue des Postes in the parish of Saint-Medard. In order to benefit from the legacy however he had to apply for the required letters patent. There might have been no problem in having them granted were it not for the amount of the money involved. The will was contested by the priest's relatives and the strongest plank in their legal case was that the Community of the Holy Spirit in its application and in the letters patent thereby granted had admitted that it actually existed as a community since 1703. The directors had run into a hornets' nest. All their opponents now came out in the open to attack them, having been given the legal handle denied them by Claude. They had not merely to contend with Lebégue's relatives; the pastor of Saint-Medard declared loudly against their threatened intrusion into his parish; the University of Paris attacked them for having flaunted their rights to claim control over all higher studies when they stated in their application that their students were not to take degrees, thus incidentally depriving the University of a sizeable income in the matter of fees; the Gallicans stepped in to put pressure on the Cardinal Archbishop to suppress the seminary claiming he had no need of an extra seminary having approved of five in Paris. Finally the Jansenists were eager to strike a blow at the Jesuits in strangling this child of theirs which was promising to be a nursery of strongly anti-Jansenist clergy in France in the near future; they moved into action at the various levels.

Finding themselves under heavy siege and in danger of suppression, the directors of the seminary took evasive action principally in disclaiming all title to the disputed legacy and in claiming exemption from the 1666 edict by stating that they were a recognised seminary. When the new letters patent were issued mentioning their claim to be a recognised seminary, one very hostile Vicar General seized on this to have the Cardinal object to those letters stating that he had given no such recognition to the seminary of the Holy Spirit. This really rattled the directors. They hurriedly wrote a letter of abject apology to his Eminence regretting the implied challenge to his authority. They stated that in

their extremity in order to avoid suppression they had merely intended to appeal to the recognition given by the fact that bishops did not insist on their sending their students to any other seminary before accepting them for ordination.

A few extracts from the series of official documents of this climactic period will help not merely to document that intriguing incident but will help clarify in retrospect what Claude himself had set out to do, and they will also open a window on to the future of the community and the seminary. First the letters patent issued at Versailles on behalf of Louis XV, May 1726. This document, proposing to give legal status to the Community of the Holy Spirit, was issued as a result of an application from the directors of the community in order to be able to avail of the legacy left by Fr. Charles Lebégue.

In order to identify themselves as the Community of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the bequest they had given an outline of the history and nature of the work. The information so supplied was then used by the officials who drew up the document in legal form as Royal Letters patent, a copy of which was sent to the relevant civil authorities and to the Archbishop of Paris. A covering letter of approval from the Archbishop was appended and the relevant conditions of his approval were referred to in the Royal letter giving legal recognition to the community. We quote at some length from this letter as it gives for the first time in an official document what the successors of des Places understood as being the nature of the work he founded and which they were now endeavouring to continue along the lines laid down by him!

Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre, to all present and to come, greetings.

We have been informed that the late Claude Francis Poullart des Places, a priest from the diocese of Rennes, inspired by a special movement from God when he was then thirty years, founded in 1703 in our good city of Paris an establishment dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin Conceived without Sin, and that the object of that establishment was to aid and help poor students in their studies and train them in virtue for the useful service of the church.

Since there are a large number of seminaries in our kingdom where one receives young clerics who pay their fees, at least in part, the late des Places wished that no one would be received in his community but poor students who, though of good disposition, lacked the necessary resources to acquire the piety and knowledge which the ecclesiastical state requires. He wished by this establishment to train in a hard and toilsome life and in perfect detachment, curates, missionaries, and clerics to serve in hospitals, in poor parishes, and in other abandoned posts for which the bishops can hardly find anyone.

And in order that there might be more room in this establishment for a greater number of subjects it was agreed that no one could be admitted except those who were ready to commence either philosophy or theology and also to enable those who had finished their philosophy and theology to remain on in that community for two extra years which would allow students to acquire a real capacity and be strengthened in virtue and be trained in the exercise of the functions of the priesthood, and that they could not take any degrees so as to keep those who are being trained in a hidden and an obscure life and to remove them from whatever might give them a distaste for the lowest of ecclesiastical employment, and that they might receive Holy Orders there when bishops judge it suitable. That since Fr. des Places died in 1709 this

community had been governed after him by clerics trained by him, and that it is currently governed by six of them and that there are about eighty persons in the house; and that since it is the spirit of that community to place its trust in Providence it does not possess up till now any support and has depended solely on casual alms given by devout persons; We have been informed that the Lord has so blessed this work that not one student trained in this community has directly or indirectly sought to secure a benefice nor has any one of them given disappointment in matters of morals or doctrine.

This then is what has influenced Us to give a grant to that community of 600 livres from our large treasury, and since then an increase from our personal fund, and several prelates, edified by this institution whose advantages for the church they are experiencing, have helped it by charitable donations and have urged the assembly of the clergy to grant it in 1723 an allowance of 1,000 livres. Several other persons are strongly in favour of supporting this pious institution ...

For all those reasons and after having produced the approval given by our well-beloved cousin, Cardinal de Noailles, archbishop of Paris ... and desirous of contributing to the limits of our power to an establishment recognised as being of such advantage to the church and it being the only one of its type in our kingdom, we with full royal power and authority ... confirm the existence of this community of the Holy Spirit and of the Immaculate Conception ... In consequence we wish and are pleased that the said community be governed as it has been hitherto by priests from among those who have been trained in the house and that one of them be elected by a majority of votes in order to have power to oversee and have authority not merely over the students but also over those who have been taken on as associates in the work of the education of the students with power to admit among the students those whom he judges capable of fulfilling the spirit of the house and of sending away those he considers unfit and permitting the said community to acquire a house and property considered necessary for the good of the establishment...

2 May 1726¹²

If perchance the directors on receiving their copy of the Letters patent had exclaimed: "It is too good to be true", they were right!

On the 5 July 1726 the Cardinal wrote:

Having seen... the Letters patent concerning the community of poor students under the title of The Holy Spirit .. we consent .. on condition that the said Community and all who compose it shall be always under the immediate jurisdiction, complete correction, visitation and dependence of ourselves and our successors the archbishops of Paris; that the said community shall be conducted and governed according to the statutes and rules which we and our successors judge proper to give it, and that it come under the direction and inspection of one of our vicars general, or some other such person appointed for that purpose ...; and that the superior of the said community can not undertake any function in that office or be recognised as being such who has not been approved by us and who has not obtained from us and our successors...

This letter was not good news. Given the climate of Gallican and Jansenist leanings of many of the clergy in Paris, there was now a real possibility that a vicar general could interfere in the internal conduct of the community. He could for example,

as Fr. Bouic ruefully remarked, “dismiss a director known to be attached to sound doctrine”.¹³ The directors realised that they had now unintentionally manoeuvred themselves into the perilous situation that had been so sedulously avoided by des Places.

Another attack on their position from the formidable University of Paris had been provoked by their proclaiming publicly in the letters patent that they had ruled out the taking of degrees as part of their policy. The University now lodged their formal objection to their being granted legal status because of this and they were faced with the threat of having to send their students to attend lectures at one of the colleges controlled by the University rather than to the Jesuits as hitherto. The expense involved as well as the risk of losing control over the academic formation of the students were spectres that naturally perturbed all concerned.

New letters patent were applied for where it was hoped they would counter these serious problems. First they set out to drop the petition to be recognised as a community and claimed instead that as a fully fledged seminary enjoying the approval of bishops they were not restricted by the terms of the 1666 edict. This letter stated as follows:

...the community of poor students or scholars should rather be considered as a veritable seminary, to the establishment of which our well beloved cousin Cardinal de Noailles had given his consent, than as a simple community, and as such it would be able to benefit under the terms of our edict from the 1666 of the Lebégue legacy. That Edict in excepting explicitly seminaries, that of the Holy Spirit where are followed all the practices and exercises followed in other seminaries, should then benefit from the advantages accorded to seminaries, especially as bishops admit to Holy Orders the clerics trained in their community without insisting that they attend other seminaries ...

The letters patent then go on to reply to the objections lodged by the University:

Furthermore the University has no just right to complain that these poor students/scholars do not sit for degrees, in that they are destined to fill the lower posts in the church which do not require having a degree, and as they are poor the house is not in a position to pay the expenses necessary for taking out a degree, so it would be impossible for them to do so. But nevertheless if bishops do decide to undertake to pay for one or other of these clerics who are capable of filling higher posts, the said directors will not raise any objections provided that this happens after the students have left the seminary so as to preserve the uniformity required for the good government of the house....

The letters then go on to confirm the legal existence of The Community and Seminary of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin confirming its right to benefit from the legacy and its right not to be obliged because of the nature of its work to send its students to attend colleges under the control of the University.

In avoiding the frying pan the directors had jumped right into the fire: they claimed the status of a fully recognised seminary *de jure* when they had no such status. They might have got by using their *de facto* recognition as Claude had managed to do and as they themselves had successfully achieved up till now, but the knives were out and the enemies of the Jesuits, realising that they had the law on their side, were now determined to have their pound of flesh. The Cardinal was persuaded by his advisers that his rights were being curtailed by this latest action on the part of the seminary and its advisers.

The letter written by the directors to the Cardinal apologising for any annoyance caused him is of importance because it is a document from the seminary itself and not an edited version as in the letters patent. Its tone and the details disclosed give us a good picture of their relations with the Cardinal and a clear example of his continual vacillations to the discomfort of those concerned. As it is a rather long letter we summarise most of it and give two key paragraphs verbatim.

It is clear that the directors were in no doubt that the Cardinal had been got at by some of his advisers who were hostile to the Jesuits and were bent on taking revenge on them through hitting the seminary. They did not hesitate to let the Cardinal know this.

The case made against the seminary was that they had presumed to arrogate to themselves the prerogative of a seminary without having the Cardinal's express authority. In protesting that they had no such intention they recalled that in spite of the opposition from certain quarters he had recently agreed to their right to make application for legal recognition as a community, and that they had agreed to his request to waive part of their claim to the Lebégue bequest. At very short notice and under threat of legal proceedings against them on the grounds of their having contravened the 1666 edict they had changed their tack and claimed that as a seminary they were exempt from the strictures of that edict. They did this in good faith, not presuming to claim for themselves any prerogative beyond what the Cardinal and the other bishops had granted them over the years in recognising them as a senior seminary in line with the requirements of the Council of Trent, the Royal Ordonnances, the Assembly of the Clergy etc. They pointed out that in fact there was scarcely any difference between them and the seminary for poor students sponsored by the Cardinal himself and for whom he had secured letters patent. They now appeal to the same kind of understanding he had extended to them all along.

In explanation of their behaviour in not previously consulting him before adopting their change of approach in the most recent application for legal recognition they claimed that they were forced to act precipitately because of impending legal proceedings being brought against them on the strength of the 1666 edict. They had claimed exemption in virtue of their being a recognised seminary. Their failure to report to the Cardinal immediately was due to their being preoccupied with the attack from the University and from the other claimants to the Lebégue legacy, when all the while they were trying to cope with the heavy requirements of their duties as directors in the seminary. They apologised sincerely and protested again that there was no intended offence in what they did.

The next two paragraphs are best given verbatim.

We have no doubt, My Lord, that someone has tried to denigrate us once more in the opinion of your Eminence and that someone wanted to convince you that this affair was inspired by certain persons (i.e. the Jesuits) whom the University does not like, but we wish to protest to your Eminence that the first and second letters were drawn up and obtained without their having seen the project nor had they been consulted about what should be put in it; in a word without their having any part in it.

And with the difficulties raised by the University who want to have our students attend their colleges, we humbly beg your Eminence to recall that the late Fr. des Places had the honour of explaining to you the reasons he had for not wanting to be so compelled, and you were satisfied with them. We had also the honour of setting forth these reasons to you and your Eminence

was so kind to give your consent to the confirming of the first letters patent without imposing any obligation in this matter. We are not obliged to attend any college in particular any more than any of the other communities in your diocese. We now beg your Eminence to be allowed to maintain that liberty.

Finally, my Lord, we earnestly beg that of your paternal goodness you prescribe yourself whatever you judge to be a fitting reparation for our fault so that we may not have the sorrow of seeing any one use your name to thwart God's work. We recall with eternal gratitude that when your Eminence was approached in the past by our enemies to use your authority to destroy our community, you responded more than once: While God is being served there I will never destroy his work.

We believe that through the mercy of God we have not fallen off in the meantime and if we obtain the letters patent it will be only with a view to try to improve our community still more and more. We do not believe we have done anything to merit your disfavour. We believe on the contrary that we can honestly assure you that no community in your diocese has been more assiduous in rendering the respect to you that is your due...¹⁴

By now the directors must have felt that they had landed themselves in a very serious mess and that they had to shoulder most of the blame for having put the whole project of des Places in jeopardy. With the best of intentions they had decided not to involve the Jesuits as they planned their major initiative of seeking legal recognition in order to avail of the Lebégue legacy. All they had succeeded in achieving was the unleashing on themselves the ire of the Paris establishment.

No doubt as they now realised only too clearly the limits of their own legal expertise and lack of practical psychology, they must have turned to prayer. In their darkest hour and when feeling deeply humiliated they were to learn that the Lord was at their side working miracles for them, albeit through very human agents. A memoire on the Lebégue case in the Spiritan archives says: "Many Cardinals and other prelates who knew the virtue and merits of Fr. Claude Poullart des Places, exhorted them to continue and perfect his work and they helped them with their alms."¹⁵ Among those who helped them in their hour of need were Cardinal de Rohan, Grand almoner, Cardinal de Bissy, Bishop of Meaux, whom we have already met as the prelate who conferred minor orders on Claude, and Cardinal de Fleury.

Cardinal de Fleury, who from then on was to become a close friend and generous benefactor of Claude's community, had been himself a student at Louis le Grand in the days when it was as yet known as Collège de Clermont and had been for a time chaplain to Louis XIV. Appointed bishop of Frejus in 1699 he was an ardent supporter of the religious and social reforms recommended by the Council of Trent. Later he was to be appointed tutor to young Louis XV, counsellor to the Regent and eventually became Prime Minister and Cardinal in 1726. He was well placed to be a powerful ally, and as a man who sought to introduce a measure of peace, order and frugality in public life in France, one can imagine that Claude's work awakened a special echo in his heart.

In later years Fr. Caris was to write to Cardinal de Fleury as follows:

Your Eminence has constantly honoured this seminary which owes all that it is to you. You have now been so good as to give grounds for hopes for assistance beyond the ordinary.... In doing that you will be accomplishing a work in keeping with your charity, your zeal for the church and your love for the poor, and you will be fulfilling the designs which Louis XIV of glorious

memory would have himself implemented in funding bursaries had he but lived another six months...¹⁶

Being Prime Minister at that time the cardinal could afford to be magnanimous with funds, but away back in 1727 the serious problems facing the seminary had to be sorted out in accordance with the demands of civil and canon law.

One by one the obstacles were overcome. The hostile Vicar General, Dorsanne, fell from grace in 1728. The following year the Lord called Cardinal de Noailles to himself thus ending a long reign of well-meaning but upsetting changes of mind. His successor as Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. Charles de Vintimille, a staunch anti-Jansenist, was set on giving personal attention to the case put to him by the directors to have their petition for legal recognition supported while respecting the special spirit of their work.

Following expert legal advice this time the directors restated their case for recognition. They dropped all claim to the Lebégue legacy, forfeited any claim to conduct public religious services in the parish of Saint Medard into which they were soon to transfer their headquarters; they forfeited any claim to be recognised as one of the official seminaries of the diocese, dropped all mention of excluding their students from taking degrees at the University. They sought for recognition for what they had been from the start, namely, a house dedicated to a specific charitable work which required a stable community.

After a legal battle which lasted some eight years a Royal decree was issued 30 July 1734 giving official recognition to the Community and Seminary of the Holy Spirit on the grounds that they were very useful to the church of France and in particular to the diocese of Paris. Before being legally recognised as a Community or Society the members were obliged to have their rule of life approved by the Archbishop of Paris. Incidentally, even though now a clear distinction was being made in law, both civil and canonical, between the Seminary and the Community or Society of directors, the name by which the institute would still be known to the public was The Seminary of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

CANONICAL APPROVAL OF RULE

It took some time to get all the objectors to the original letters patent to withdraw their opposition in legal form. In the meantime they had begun drafting a new rule for the community about to be given civil and canonical recognition. This rule set out to include as much of Claude's rule for the seminary as was relevant, and adding what they had learned from practical experience of living together as a community during Claude's time and after. This intention to hold fast to what they had received is attested to in the text of the official approval of the rule by the Archbishop of Paris and again in the rule itself where limits are put to the powers of the superior in the matter of changing any part of the rule. First the approval by the archbishop, Mgr. de Vintimille, 2 January 1734:

CHARLES GASPAR WILLIAM DE VINTIMILLE, of the Courts of Marseilles by the mercy of God and the grace of the Holy Apostolic See, Archbishop of Paris, Duke of St. Clodoald, Peer of France, Commander of the Order of the Holy Spirit, etc. etc.

To the Superior and the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin; beloved to us in Christ, Greetings:

The Rules and the Constitutions of your Society which in part you received from the Venerable Claude Poullart des Places, a priest and your founder, and

which in part you wrote yourselves after long and happy experience, we have read and pondered over attentively, and they are as follows:¹⁸

Among the rules governing the actions of the Superior No. 61 sets out to restrict his discretionary powers to alter what had been handed down:

What is accepted custom he will not change without the consent of his council nor shall he introduce new customs under the pretext of a greater good.

Finally, in the special copy of the rule preserved in the Spiritan archives, the following paragraph was entered by the directors:

Having drawn up our Rules and Statutes, we beseech our brothers and our successors in the name of the Lord that they sedulously observe these pious usages the majority of which we have received from Claude Francis Poullart des Places, priest and founder of virtuous memory.¹⁹

The opening paragraphs of the rule, dealing with the dedication and purpose of the society, are a clear statement of what des Places had written in his rule for the seminary and what they had understood to be his intentions for the ongoing development of his work, namely the gradual formation of a community dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and committed to the vocation of training poor students in such a way that they would be suitably prepared for serving the church in the most demanding ministries.

I The Society is consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin and shall therefore celebrate with special devotion the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception so that the hearts of all may be inflamed with divine love, and that all may obtain perfect cleanliness of heart and body.²⁰

Quoting once more from the statement appended to the special copy of the rule preserved in the seminary archives and addressed to all future directors:

And as their priority let them remember that this society consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the patronage of the Immaculate Virgin should be governed according to the light and the burning love of the same Holy Spirit; and that nothing should be left undone by us or by those under our charge which might help to ensure that we will have the most Holy Mother of God as our advocate with him. Let us then love her as our mother, reverence her as our mistress, honour her frequently as the Mother of God as we have been doing all along in all our exercises and necessities, let us invoke her after we have invoked the Holy Spirit Let our emblem and crest be the image of the Holy Spirit together with the image or at least the name of the Blessed Virgin. And whatever love, devotion and legitimate cult can according to the holy doctors of the church be given to the most powerful Mother of God, let us give her that and let us try to ensure that the faithful do likewise..²¹

When speaking of the device of the society there is no mention of the current motto: *Cor unum et Anima una*, but there is ample evidence that this motto was of the essence of the origins of the society and that it was the hallmark of life in the seminary as recalled later by the students.²²

As evidence of their devotion to the Holy Spirit they had it enshrined in their rule that they were to say the office of the Holy Spirit daily as part of their prayer

life. It would seem, however, that at some stage they were taunted by the Jansenists that in spite of their dedication to Our Lady they gave little evidence of any special devotion to her. In reply to this accusation we find a document outlining fourteen devotional exercises in honour of Our Lady which were part of the religious life of the seminary. All said the daily rosary, recited the litany of Our Lady; all exercises were begun by the invocation of the Holy Spirit followed by the Hail Mary and concluded by the prayer to Our Lady beginning with the words *Sub tuum praesidium*; nine times daily they saluted the Immaculate Conception by the prayer: *Per Sanctam* . . . where they prayed to her for the gift of purity of heart and body; at supper they recited the Inviolata with its special prayer, all fasted in her honour on the vigil of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, a custom honoured by most on the vigil of the other feasts of Our Lady and on Saturdays when all made it a duty to receive Holy Communion in her honour; many recited daily the Little Office of Our Lady approved for use in the universal church and in addition several recited the special office composed by St. Bonaventure in her honour; many of the students partook in pilgrimages to the noted shrines of Our Lady and the custom of making two daily visits to the shrine of Our Lady of Rescue at St. Etienne des Grés is observed by the students. Finally it is affirmed that all in the seminary strive to promote devotion to Our Lady among others. This list closes with the remark that those who have accused them of neglecting devotion to Our Lady should be ashamed of themselves!²³

Moving on to the canonical status of the Society and its particular service in the church, the 1734 Rule states:

II The Society is under the immediate jurisdiction and correction of the illustrious Archbishop of Paris and his successors and has for purpose to educate poor clerics in ecclesiastical discipline, zeal and love of virtue, especially of obedience and poverty, who will be ready for everything in the hands of the prelates, to serve in hospices, to evangelize the poor and the infidels, and not only to undertake but to love wholeheartedly and to prefer to everything else the lowliest and most toilsome ecclesiastical duties for which ministers are found only with difficulty.²⁴

The society then as canonically approved was an institute of secular priests under the immediate jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Paris, and though they committed themselves to live in community and to practise the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, there was no provision for taking public vows to that effect. Membership of the society was sealed by a civil contract (No. 34).

When we come to examine the type of priests they strove to fashion, there is no evidence that they planned to form a religious society or even a conscious extension of their own community in a loosely federated institute of secular priests in anyway bound to one another or to the seminary. Such a project would be attempted in the distant future for other reasons. When they trained their students to poverty it was in order that they might opt for a style of life in keeping with evangelical poverty encouraging an attitude of complete availability to their ecclesiastical superiors and again when they laid great stress on practicing obedience it was in order that they would give their full obedience to their bishops and mother church. But the fact that the alumni of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit were occasionally referred to as Spiritans is taken as connoting more than the mere fact that they originated from the seminary. As the alumni of other senior seminaries were not so grouped under a common label of origin the appellation Spiritan may well point to something common in their spiritual outlook and to the fact that they were known to accept

more readily to serve in the least rewarding ministries. There is not sufficient evidence that the students of the Spiritan seminary kept in close contact with one another but there is ample evidence that they remained in friendly correspondence with their former directors back home in their Alma Mater.²⁵

The 1734 rule has some obvious affinities with the Jesuit rule but these could well be due to years of close association with Jesuits as teachers and directors rather than to any conscious borrowings. And indeed they may well have learned the lesson that the Jesuit connection was not to be paraded, given the temper of the times. The rule, in fact, leaves one with the impression that the writers did not set out to compose any grandiose document but rather they were just committing to writing what they had already been zealously practising as a community.

FIELDS OF ACTION

Among the more difficult ministries for which the students were to be prepared we find for the first time direct mention of evangelizing infidels. The word missionaries mentioned in the first letters patent, 2 May 1726, could refer to those who were thinking of joining Grignon de Montfort's society of Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, that is priests committed to a roving mission rather than to a fixed parish post in the home country. Evangelizing infidels is not so much a new dimension added to what Claude had envisaged but rather a natural evolution of the concept of difficult undertakings once the conditions were right for being able to go on the foreign missions. That was not the case in 1715, as we saw, when Fr. Vatel made his unsuccessful attempt to go to the West Indies. Those opting for overseas mission work had to join one of the approved societies already in the field.

Writing some sixty years after the death of Claude, Fr. Besnard, superior of the society founded by Grignon de Montfort, had this to say about the seminary and its alumni:

One sees that under the guidance of their immediate superiors and at the first sign of their will – but always in dependence on the bishops – they constitute a kind of military detachment of auxiliary troops, ready to go anywhere there is work to be done for the salvation of souls. They consecrate themselves preferably to missionary activity both foreign and domestic, offering to go and stay in the poorest and most abandoned places for which it is especially difficult to find candidates. Whether it is a question of being exiled into the remote countryside or buried in the caverns of a hospital, teaching in a college, lecturing in a seminary, directing a poor community, travelling to the farthest corners of the Kingdom [of France] or staying there in an austere post, whether it is question even of crossing the seas and going to the very ends of the earth to gain a soul for Christ – their motto is: Behold, we are ready to do Thy will: *Ecce ego, mitte me*. Is.6, v.XII.

Speaking in particular about the alumni of the seminary who had joined his own society, the Company of Mary, Fr. Besnard had this to add:

Finally, this holy house is as a blessed garden from which each year young plants are drawn which will produce excellent fruits in the lands for which they are destined. It has often furnished us for our establishment of St. Laurent-sur-Sèvres candidates in whom we have found all the qualities needed by zealous missionaries. They themselves can testify that they have never seen anything in the Rule of Father de Montfort which was not in

conformity with the principles of conduct adhered to in the Community of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

Once the seminary became established and the high quality of its work had been proved, it was natural that bishops would seek the help of the new society in the running of their diocesan seminaries. Two such requests were accepted, one from the diocese of Meaux presided over by Cardinal de Bissy and the other from the diocese of Verdun where there was a serious problem in trying to eradicate the influence of Jansenism. That other offers were not complied with was probably due to the lack of sufficient personnel. The restricted number of associates accepted into the community is explained by the fact that they saw the seminary as their principal reason for existing as a society; so they were content to limit their numbers to that requirement. It was not the policy in the beginning for the directors to go on external mission work themselves. One wonders if in this they were recalling the words of Claude when urged by Grignon de Montfort to opt for service in the parish missions in his company. At that time Claude felt that his special vocation and charism was for the formation of missionary priests rather than in actual mission works.²⁷ Matters changed in this respect when special mission territories were confided to the care of the society by the Holy See.

When the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Vintimille, approved the rule for the Community of the Holy Spirit in 1724 he wrote:

Having given the Rules and Constitutions our mature consideration we have judged them worthy to be confirmed by our authority as most suitable for the purpose of directing your seminary for the utility of the Gallican church ...

The Gallican church in the context embraced not merely France itself but also the overseas territories in the Americas and elsewhere which had come under French control. It was natural then that in time priests trained at the seminary would find their way to these foreign parts as a matter of course. Already in the 1730s Fr. Bouic could write that favourable reports about their alumni were reaching the seminary. In one letter he wrote:

Thanks be to God's mercy, we have already trained a good number who are working zealously and giving a good example.

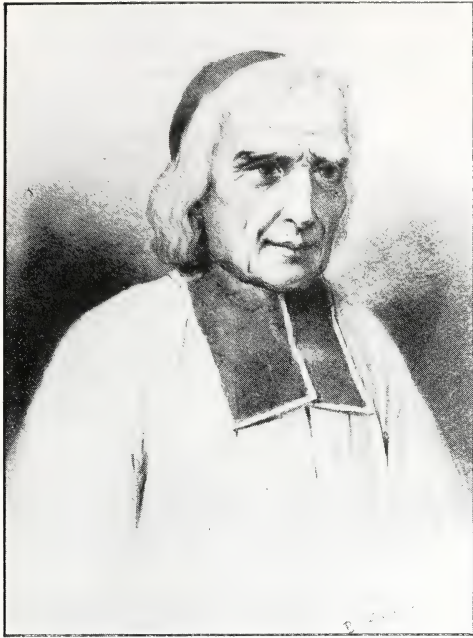
In another letter he is more expansive:

Every day we receive good reports about most of them to the effect that they are very edifying and are doing fruitful work for the salvation of souls. Several of them, in less than three years, have re-established many parishes, restoring faith and piety and the frequentation of the sacraments. They learned here the importance of these things; now they are communicating it to others.

As there is no reference in these letters to reports from foreign parts one presumes that Bouic is referring to work being done in the home country.

In order to qualify for free transport aboard government ships and to avail of other material help, all Spiritans wanting to go to foreign missions had to put in a period of apprenticeship with the Society of Foreign Missions who were the clearing house, so to speak, recognised by the government. Some priests from the Seminary opted for service in the Far East; the exact number is not known – possibly not more than a dozen, but it is quite a tribute to their training and their quality that six of them were appointed bishops!²⁸ Their story does not belong here.

While parts of the North American continent were under French control quite



François Becquet 1773-88



John M. Duflos 1788-1805



The Seminary, Rue l'Homond, acquired 1732

a number of Spiritans set off for there, again in the early days under the auspices of the Society of the Foreign Missions. The official government representative or Chaplain General to the Colonies for many years was Fr. Peter de La Rue better known as the Abbot of Isle Dieu, because after obtaining the benefice of this medieval abbacy he always signed his letters and papers in this fashion. He learned to appreciate very highly the quality of the priests from the Seminary of the Holy Spirit whom he had sponsored for various missions. Consequently he tried on more than one occasion to have them given complete control of the Quebec diocesan seminary but this was opposed by the Society of Foreign Missions.²⁹ When the French Government proposed to replace priests from religious orders with secular priests the Abbot gave his full support as he was convinced by then that the Seminary of the Holy Spirit could play a very fruitful role in the new deal. He wrote as follows about the Spiritan missionaries:

The priests trained and educated at the Holy Spirit Seminary ... have always surpassed my hopes, without a single one of them ever disappointing me.

The Nuncio in Paris had already written in April 1764 to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda concerning the proposal to replace the religious missionaries in the French Colonies in America with priests from the Holy Spirit Seminary:

I begged his Grace (the Duke de Choiseul) to choose for the missions priests of genuine merit as to their teaching and good example. Since he has replied that he hoped to find them at the Holy Spirit Seminary, I believe we shall have every reason to be satisfied if he follows this plan...

A few months later, on October 15, 1764, the same Nuncio wrote again concerning the same subject:

I suppose that the Minister at Versailles has decided no longer to use religious in those regions. It is certain that there could be no better choice than the clerics from this Seminary – it is an excellent one. This Seminary, by its very foundation, is obliged to furnish the men needed in the missions, and these, as a result have to be devout and well educated in the fields required for such work. They are trained for a sober, modest and hard-working life...³⁰

It was natural that in areas where personnel from the Seminary were actively engaged in pastoral work the superior of the Society would be urged to take a direct interest in these priests and in the pastoral needs of the region. The first occasion this arose was when the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon were detached from the diocese of Quebec after control of Canada had passed into British hands. Rome asked the superior, Fr. Becquet, to assume the duties of Prefect Apostolic for the area and to undertake to provide pastors. In subsequent correspondence with Propaganda, Fr. Becquet signs himself as Superior General of the Society or Congregation of the Holy Spirit.³¹

With the suppression of the Jesuits, Propaganda Fide asked the Society of the Holy Spirit in 1768 to take on responsibility for the mission hitherto operated by the Jesuits in French Guiana.³² In 1778, for the first time, two of the seminary personnel, Frs. de Glicourt and Bertout set out for this mission to take over control. Shipwreck however forced them to land in Senegal, West Africa, instead of South America. After some harrowing experiences on being held and sold as “slaves”, they eventually arrived back in France. Setting off again for Guiana, Fr. de Glicourt found himself landed again involuntarily in Senegal! This time he

remained on as Prefect Apostolic, thus beginning, all unknown to himself, the Society's long and fruitful association with Africa.

When a number of former students of the Seminary found themselves working in the same region it was not surprising that they should seek to cement their relations with one another and with their former directors back home. A call for some form of association with the society came spontaneously from the groups of Spiritans working in Guiana. They wanted to continue to follow the rule of life they had seen their directors put into practice with such effect in the Seminary, especially their *cor unum et anima una* or family spirit, together with a lifestyle of evangelical poverty and some form of obedience to the Superior General. The precise terms of this very real association had not been worked out but there is evidence that the 'associates' accepted new appointments from the Superior and at least two returned in later years 'to die among the confreres' in France.

NEW HORIZONS

The ever simmering hostility to the Jesuits came to a boil at last in 1761. The Parliament of Paris closed down the Jesuit faculty of theology at Louis le Grand. This posed a serious problem for the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and in particular for Fr. Bouic then in his seventy-seventh year. In 1762, when the Jesuits were suppressed and their property confiscated by the government, the University of Paris planned to relocate the College of Lissieux at Louis le Grand and to oblige all colleges *sans exercise*, that is without the full recognised courses, to send their students to attend lectures at the College of Lissieux. Among the institutes affected by this policy change was the Irish College. The directors filed a petition to be allowed to continue as hitherto sending their students to the colleges with which they had long and close associations. They were granted that concession.³³ The Seminary of the Holy Spirit now found itself being ordered to send its students to attend lectures at a college under the auspices of the University and being threatened with closure if they refused to comply. It would appear that to avoid being closed they were on the verge of complying with the directive of the University when the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Beaumont, intervened on their behalf with the Attorney General repeating the reasons given years earlier by des Places to his predecessor, Cardinal de Noailles, when he wanted the poor students to attend the Sorbonne rather than the course given by the Jesuits.³⁴ From then on all the lectures in philosophy and theology were given by the seminary staff at their own premises in rue des Postes. Finally the *repetiteurs* had come of age as professors.

At this time also members of the seminary team found themselves conducting the diocesan seminaries at Meaux and Verdun. Efforts were made to have them take over the running of the diocesan seminary in Corsica³⁵ and even in Quebec, Canada. By 1789 there were seven members of the society engaged at the seminary in Paris. The society had acquired possession of three houses to serve as holiday centres for the community and students. A number of the associates had already set off for work in the missions. Fr. Becquet, the new superior, had been busily involved in extending the seminary buildings and had completed the splendid chapel (1780). A few years later a wing was built beside the chapel which was intended to cater for those returned from the foreign missions and for those invalided.³⁶ This project was part of the natural development which would have led in time to a new deal in the society. With the expansion of the society's commitments at home and abroad consideration must have been given to the remedying of a serious drawback in its organisation, namely the

restricted numbers being admitted to full membership. The limited membership did not hamper matters when the one aim had been to provide proper seminary training for a limited number of seriously disadvantaged students. That number so trained by 1790 is estimated to have reached around 1,300 only a handful of these being co-opted as associates.³⁷

Of late the society was being asked not merely to take on the direction of seminaries at home but since the suppression of the Jesuits they were finding themselves being cast by the government and by Rome in the role of main suppliers of pastors for the French colonies. And it was becoming progressively clearer that in order to cope properly with the work on the missions it would not be enough to send out well-trained man and then disclaim all responsibility for their welfare and their conduct. There were no developed church structures in place to ensure the necessary control of pastoral work. Gradually the conviction was building up that the best solution would be that associates of the society should go on the missions and achieve the required moral as well as canonical authority over the colonial clergy while acting in understanding with the superior general. To cope with this extra demand on membership and to undertake the added administrative burden was beyond the resources of Fr. Becquet by then in his eighties. When Fr. Becquet died 28 October 1788 aged 83 he was succeeded by Fr. John Duflos. Whatever plans of expansion he might have had in mind were to be overtaken by history. The Revolution broke with devastating consequences the following year.

SUPPRESSION AND REVIVAL

By November 1789 the National Assembly had decreed that all church-owned property was to be put at the disposal of the State. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790 suppressed all religious societies whose members were bound by vows. The Society had so far escaped. But in 1792 all religious societies were suppressed, and this time the Spiritans had the distinction of being named twice, once as Bouics, the name used in former times by the Jansenists when they wanted to suppress the seminary. In 1793 the Seminary was raided by a mob of Sans-culottes. The few who had remained on in the seminary miraculously escaped their attentions. The Eudists nearby were not so fortunate: 30 members gathered there were led away and cruelly executed. The Seminary premises were confiscated and sold in 1796 for a mere 46,000 livres. The students had all dispersed by then and some of the directors had merged into the parish clergy or fled the country. One tenant who rented the seminary premises for some eight or nine years was an Irish priest, Fr. James McDermot. He is reported as having spent a large sum of money improving the premises to adapt them to his own scheme of conducting a high class boarding school. He also secretly allowed some religious and clergy to shelter in a portion of the large house.³⁸

Fr. John Duflos, who had been elected superior of the Society on the eve of the Revolution, was soon broken in health and being cared for by the former cook of the seminary. Duflos' nephew, Fr. James Bertout, whom we last met after his ordeal in Senegal as he tried to get to Guiana, had a narrow escape from his pursuers during the Revolution. He made his way to England where he was to serve as pastor till the storm abated in France. He returned to Paris in 1802 to find his uncle blind and near death. The other directors had given up any hope of restoring the society and one of them, Fr. Boudot, was now Vicar General of the Paris diocese.

Singlehanded, Fr. Bertout set about picking up the bits with the intention of re-establishing the Society just one hundred years after it had been founded by Claude Poullart des Places. The world of the nobles which Claude had turned

his back on had been swept away by the Revolution but his work for the poor and abandoned had perished in the maelstrom. In the absence of the seminary premises, its hallowed associations, its records, and above all its students and directors, one can only wonder at what inspired Fr. Bertout to attempt the seemingly impossible task. His idealism is surely one of the greatest tributes to the memory of the work begun by Claude and which had lived up so faithfully to his expectations.

In 1805 Napoleon was persuaded to give legal recognition once more to the Society of the Holy Spirit. Fr. Bertout helped another Spiritan priest to run a second level school in Paris. He also strove to get some priests to volunteer for service in the colonies then desperate for pastors. The Spiritan Prefect Apostolic of Martinique, Fr. Perrin, put forward again at this time the suggestion that all priests sent to the colonies should be in some way made associates of the Society and that they be subject to the Superior General for re-appointment and be allowed to return to live in retirement in the Spiritan community.³⁹ One of the motives in promoting this project just then was to ensure control over the clergy in the colonies as there was little practical control being exercised to the detriment of pastoral work. Unfortunately Fr. Perrin's suggestions did not get a chance to succeed. In 1808 Fr. Bertout's school had some 130 students, 25 of whom were judged sufficiently advanced to start their philosophy course. Disaster struck again, however. In 1809, Napoleon, piqued by the lack of compliance shown by Pope Pius VII, decided to suppress all religious societies once more.

After the defeat of Napoleon, the Society of the Foreign Missions succeeded in re-gaining its legal recognition. At this stage Fr. Bertout decided to join that society believing that this was the best way he could serve the church. When, however, in 1816, Louis XVIII agreed to give civil recognition to the Vincentians and the Spiritans, Fr. Bertout courageously once again undertook the task of building up the Society and re-founding the seminary.⁴⁰

COLONIAL SEMINARY

Though the Royal Ordonnance re-establishing the Society of the Holy Spirit referred back to the letters patent of 1726 and 1727 as defining the purpose and indicating the rules governing the Society, it was made clear to Fr. Bertout that the task now being set for it by the government was to supply priests to work in the French colonies. Bertout made it clear that the government must provide the financial aid to make that work possible and that the seminary premises be returned to them. The seminary was by then occupied by the Ecole Normale, a new third level institute engaged in teacher training. It took several years to get them to vacate the premises and move to the former English College next door. In the meantime the seminary work commenced in rue Notre Dame des Champs and the government stipulated that until the Society was in a position to send their own priests trained in the seminary they would approach the French Bishops to try to have them release priests to serve in the colonies. All such priests were to be obliged to spend a certain time in the seminary before being allowed to set out for the colonies at the expense of the Government.⁴¹

A very promising venture was launched in 1817. A Juniorate was opened in the vicinity of the former seminary premises. The funds for this work were supplied by Spiritan, Fr. Mathiew Hérard, who returned temporarily from the American mission to assist Fr. Bertout in his efforts to restore the work of the Society. Among the staff who helped relaunch the philosophy and theology courses was a Fr. Corrigan who was obviously of Irish origin.⁴²

When eventually the seminary was able to return to its former location in 30

rue des Postes early in December 1822, the ceremony of relaunching the work was attended by the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Quelen, assisted by his Vicar General, Fr. Boudot, a former director of the seminary. Fr. Bertout was now joined by his nephew, Fr. Amable Fourdinier, former student of the seminary and till recently professor in the diocesan seminary of Arras. More remarkable was the co-option of two Irish priests as professors and Spiritans, Fr. Corrigan and Fr. Henry Power, and with them came some Irish students among whom were Richard Smith who was later to be appointed Archbishop of Trinidad, and John Brady who after some years service in Reunion was to be Bishop of Perth in Australia where he was to feature in an unhappy relationship with some members of The Society of the Holy Heart of Mary founded by Fr. Libermann. Though the Government was very anxious that Fr. Bertout should provide priests from the seminary at the earliest possible opportunity he insisted on implementing the full six years course of priestly studies as laid down by des Places. This had one unforeseen problem. The alumni of the seminary were seen to be of such high quality compared to what some of the diocesan seminaries were turning out that bishops were reluctant to release such men from their dioceses to serve in the colonies. The authority of both the Government and the Holy See had to be invoked at times to cope with this problem.⁴³

Fr. Bertout was anxious to have his society given Pontifical status because of its involvement with Propaganda Fide in the matter of supplying priests to overseas territories. He submitted the 1734 Rule for approval by Rome. The Roman authorities were impressed by the document and had no hesitation about giving it approval but they asked that a clause be inserted to the effect that all matters pertaining to the missions should be dealt directly with the Holy See; in internal matters they were still subject to the Archbishop of Paris. This approval was given 7 February, 1824. It was a step towards opening the Society to church life outside of France and was expected to help somewhat towards solving the problem of the lack of control over clergy going to the colonies.⁴⁴

An entry in the list of official documents of the Society published in 1917 refers to the erecting in the Seminary of a branch of the Confraternity of the most Pure Heart of Mary on 8 December 1828.⁴⁵ The significance of that event was that some 20 students led by René Louis Bertin had formed a society called the Association of the Most Pure Heart of Mary. They were following the example of the Archbishop of Paris who the previous year had given public support to this special devotion. These twenty students went a step farther and asked Fr. Bertout to be allowed join the Society of the Holy Spirit as full members after a novitiate period lasting two years. This project, together with the flourishing juniorate which they were authorised to open beside the senior seminary, augured the dawn of a new era. But this was not to be. The onset of the 1830 Revolution once more threatened the very existence of the society and seminary.⁴⁶

The new Minister for the Navy and the Colonies, Sabastiani, a former officer in Napoleon's army, had a strong grudge against Fr. Bertout because of some of his recorded statements. He immediately withdrew the government subsidy for the seminary and ordered the closure forthwith of the junior seminary. He even threatened to exclude Spiritans from the colonies and to take over possession of the seminary buildings. Soldiers raided and pillaged the premises. Though Sabastiani soon lost his post, the harm he had done to the seminary was so serious that it had to be closed. The 67 students were dispersed and the directors having nothing to do sought employment elsewhere. Fr. Henry Power, like the Irish Cistercian monks at Mont Melleray in Brittany, decided to say *Adieu* to unpredictable France and return to Ireland.⁴⁷

An effort was made October 1831 to restart the seminary but with their lack of resources they could cater only for a reduced number of students. March 1832 an epidemic of cholera broke out in Paris carrying away 20,000 lives. The army being very badly hit for hospital accommodation, Fr. Bertout, in his charity, offered them accommodation in the seminary. He took the precaution in having a guarantee given in writing that all would move out once the epidemic had passed. The army moved in and proceeded to take over, remodelling the interior, demolishing walls and without any reference to Fr. Bertout acted as if this was to be their permanent quarters. This was the last cruel blow for poor Fr. Bertout. He had lived to see all his thirty year's work negated. Heart broken he must have been. He was called home to the Lord, 10 December 1832 aged seventy two. His funeral obsequies were presided over by Fr. Boudot, Vicar General, one of the last two Spiritans from the pre-Revolution golden days.

Cold statistics can not do justice to the heroic sacrifices of Fr. Bertout, but they can help give us some tangible evidence of his singlehanded achievement. At the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 there were 137 priests in the French Colonies. By 1816 the number was reduced to 23, eight of whom had been sent out by Fr. Bertout. Between 1816 and 1832 he had managed to send 97. To put these figures in perspective: The Foreign Missions Society had sent 2 priests on the missions between 1804 and 1816; by 1822 they had 7 seminarians; and by 1831 they were credited with having 53 missionaries all told.⁴⁸

Fr. Bertout, who was responsible for restoring the society after it had been suppressed by the Revolution, had, shortly before his death, a striking reminder of the original founding ceremony held in the Church of St. Etienne des Grés, Pentecost 1703. He was the first witness called in 1830 by the Archbishop of Paris to authenticate the statue of the Black Madonna of Paris – N.D. de bonne Délivrance, which had been moved from one secret location to another since the suppression of the Church of St. Etienne during the Revolution.

MOUNTING CHALLENGES

FR. AMABLE FOURDINIER

Fr. Amable Fourdinier, who succeeded Fr. Bertout, had been his assistant since 1817. He knew the problems facing him and the fact that he did not seek to return to the quiet of Arras once again is an indication of his commitment. He knew that his first big problem was to regain possession of the Seminary. But not till April 1835 did General Soult pull out his men after putting up a dogged battle to hold on. Fr. Fourdinier did not wait till then to start the seminary courses. These began in 1833. It was some problem to gather once more a suitable team of professors. Fr. John Hardy, returned from Guiana, was intelligent but unstable; Fr. Nicholas Warnet, though in ill-health after his term in Reunion, was a very understanding man dedicated to maintaining the spiritual heritage of the Society as we can see from some of his allocutions to the seminarians from which we have quoted earlier. But the greatest acquisition was Fr. Mathurin Gaultier, a sound theologian, a staunch Romanist and a charismatic lecturer and conversationalist that made him the darling of the students and the centre of the theological life of Paris. His erudition and his well stocked library attracted to rue des Postes such leading lights in the church of France as J.P. Migne, the noted publisher of the works of the Fathers of the Church, the learned archeologist, Dom Pitra, later Cardinal, the historian René Rohrbacher who came to reside in the Seminary, the leading canon law expert, Fr. Bouix, the pioneers in the revival of the liturgy and plain chant, Bishop Parisi, Cardinal Gousset, Dom Guenger with their



James Bertout 1805-32



Amable Fourdinier 1832-45



Ordination of three black African priests at Rue l'Homond 1840

publisher Le Coffre, as well as Louis Veuillot, founder of the Catholic paper, *L'Univers*, and so many others. All these under the leadership of Gaultier were bent on ridding the church in France of Gallicanism and the serious vestiges of Jansenism. It was good for the students to be alive in those days.⁴⁹

There were those in the Government who realised too late that they had made a serious mistake in trying to kill off the Seminary just at the time when they most needed its sterling services. Slavery, given a new lease of life by Napoleon, would have to be abolished in the near future and this posed the spectre of thousands of slaves regaining their liberty with no restraining influence to prevent anarchy. It was only the religious teachers who would have any moral authority and who could be relied on to prepare the black population for facing up to their new situation. It was not love of religion therefore that made the Government set aside a special budget for the building of churches and schools in the colonies and the training of clergy. A grant of 50,000 francs was made to the Seminary for the education of 60 seminarians. And in 1839 the Minister for the Navy wrote to the Minister for Cult as follows:

The Seminary of the Holy Spirit is now the only Congregation which by the very purpose of its institution, is capable of training and supplying the colonies with priests who are reliable... Accordingly, it is exclusively to ... the Superior that we entrust the education, selection and general direction of the priests called to work at this delicate and laborious task of morally training the blacks of the colonies.⁵⁰

Here, incidentally, we have in fact the special purpose of the Society being re-defined for the third time in its development. And the statement had an ironic note to it: just then another society was being dreamt up by a group of clerical students which would have exactly the same purpose, the evangelisation of the liberated black slaves.

In the light of subsequent developments, the following year, 1840, was marked by three significant events. The Sodality of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, established in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in 1828, was officially affiliated to the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Victories. There, under the direction of the pastor Fr. Desgenettes, prayers were regularly offered and discussions held concerning what was generally referred to as "The Work for the Blacks". During that year a group of clerical students connected with Saint-Sulpice, who had planned to devote their lives to pastoral work among the liberated black slaves, approached Fr. Fourdinier for admittance into his society but on their own terms as a society within a society. Finally there took place in the seminary chapel at rue des Postes a historic event, namely the first ordination in modern times of three native black Africans. This event was due to the ideas of the spiritan priest, Fr. M. Baradère, sent by Fr. Bertout in 1820 to Senegal, from whom Mother Javouhey got the inspiration to undertake the education of these students in France before passing them on to the seminary where Fr. Fourdinier undertook to sponsor their promotion to ordination.⁵¹

The Government's urgent demands for priests for the colonies could not be met from the Seminary itself due to the treatment meted out to it by the 1830 Revolution. Now the Society was being urged to approach the bishops to get them to release priests in favour of the colonies. To say that the Bishops did not encourage their best priests to volunteer would be an understatement. This reaction was understandable. All parts of France were still suffering from the effects of both Revolutions in the matter of the shortage of clergy.

The big problem for Fr. Fourdinier was that though he alone had the right to send priests to the colonies as guests of the Government he had absolutely no control over them once they had reached their destination. That some less than suitable men got through on recommendations that were not reliable is understandable. A period of vetting at the Seminary was in theory obligatory but even this did not always succeed in distinguishing the suitable from the less suitable. And other priests avoided the net held by Fourdinier in that they had other recommendations. When however problems arose about a particular priest in the colonies the blame was laid at the door of the Seminary superior. Yet he was denied any power in the matter by Rome. He had the right to suggest the name for the office of Prefect-Apostolic and that name was usually accepted by Rome and by the French Government, each very jealous of the interference of the other.⁵²

In an attempt to solve the problem of the lack of control over the clergy sent to the colonies, Fourdinier tried on several occasions to revive the project proposed earlier by the clergy themselves, namely that all be affiliated to the Society with certain guarantees and definite obligations. There was little enthusiasm now, however, among the colonial clergy for this idea which was viewed as a ploy being introduced from outside for administrative purposes.⁵³ The more obvious solution, which did not depend on Fourdinier, would have been to appoint as superiors on the missions, priests who were endowed with episcopal character, Vicars-Apostolic, as they were soon to be known. This depended on the Holy See in consultation with the French Government and such a solution was being discussed in 1844; but once again the political situation in France held up matters. So Fr. Fourdinier was still left carrying the can, so to speak, for higher authorities.

A new element had entered the scene by then. In 1839 a number of clerical students at Saint Sulpice, in consultation with directors there, had planned to found a new society devoted entirely to the evangelisation of the liberated slaves in the French colonies. A convert Jew, Francis Libermann, at that time acting as master of novices in the Eudist novitiate in Rennes, was entrusted with the job of setting up such a society. Late in 1839 he went to Rome to submit his plans and to seek approval. In Paris, Fr. Fourdinier was approached to allow these clerical students enter his society as a group. He generously offered them a separate mission, namely Guiana. This offer was not accepted as they wanted to be free from parish commitments and to live in community ministering only to the liberated slaves. Fourdinier did however facilitate members of the new society, namely The Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, to travel to the French colonies aboard government vessels.⁵⁴

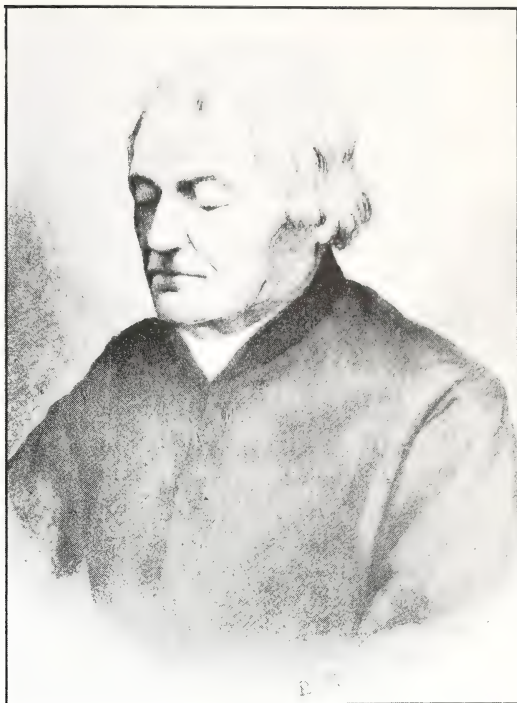
Libermann's society showed signs of rapid development and Libermann's own expertise in management soon impressed both Rome and French government officials. By late 1844 a move was already afoot to replace the Society of the Holy Spirit with Libermann's society in the matter of supplying priests for the colonies. The news of this development, after he had worked so hard trying to retrieve a situation that was none of his own making, may have hastened Fr. Fourdinier's death. He died 5 January 1845, aged fifty seven years.⁵⁵

FR. NICHOLAS WARNET (7 JAN TO 28 APRIL 1845)

The death of Fr. Fourdinier threw the Society into a deep crisis. No one of the Spiritans in Paris was considered up to the demands of the superiorship at that critical moment. It was decided to call on an outsider, Fr. Alexander Leguay, Vicar General of the diocese of Perpignan. He had lived in Paris for ten years during



Alexander Leguay 1845-8



Nicholas Warnet 1845



Alexander Monnet 1848

which time he was on very intimate relations with the Seminary and had actually resided there for four years. So he was by no means a total stranger; and he was well known to the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. Affre, who agreed to his nomination as superior thus dispensing from the rule about the requirements for a valid election. Fr. Leguay agreed to take on the job but he asked for time to wind up his affairs in the diocese of Perpignan. In the meantime Fr. Nicholas Warnet agreed to act as superior, but made it clear to all that he was not going to tie his successor's hands by making any decisions apart from attending to routine affairs. Fr. Warnet had been sent to Reunion by Fr. Bertout together with Fr. M. Sullivan. Both are on record as having proved exceptionally exemplary missionaries.⁵⁶ A student who came under the influence of Fr. Warnet in Reunion was Frederick Le Vasseur, future co-founder of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary with Libermann. Warnet, seeing his potential, supervised his transfer to France to pursue his higher studies. Later Le Vasseur was responsible for introducing Warnet to Libermann with whom he developed a close understanding. Now in his capacity as interim superior he facilitated the passage of some of Libermann's priests setting out for Reunion. Indeed he would be in favour of some close link up with Fr. Libermann's society at home and abroad if that depended on him. But Fr. Warnet, who had sedulously strove to maintain the spiritual heritage of his society, had no ambitions to be involved in the shaping of the society's administrative policy. He gladly handed over control 28 April 1845 to Fr. Leguay retiring into the background until the Lord would need his services once again as a useful linkman.⁵⁷

FR. ALEXANDER LEGUAY (1845-1848)

Fr. Leguay was a very able man, gifted in many ways, an author, director and administrator, but he laboured under some notable disadvantages on undertaking his new office. He did not really have the feel for the Spiritan tradition and he started off with a strong dose of anti-Libermann prejudice. He had absorbed anti-Libermann rumours while in Paris, viewing matters from the sideline, and this prejudice was confirmed by what he learned about the high-handed behaviour of Libermann's disciples, Fr. Tisserant in the West Indies, Fr. Le Vasseur's ignoring his superiors in Reunion, and even certain decisions of Fr. Libermann about the mission in Senegal, a territory where Fr. Leguay considered he had recognised interests to protect.

In an effort to come to grips with the problems in the ranks of the colonial clergy he set about drawing up some drastic plans. No one was to be accepted into the seminary henceforth except those intending to join the Congregation; the option of a two years novitiate was given to those there already and to the priests on the missions who wished to join. Thirty priests availed of that option including his own successor as superior, Fr. Alexander Monnet in Reunion. Living in community as far as possible was to be introduced on the missions and the practice of poverty was relaxed in that ordinary expenditures could be deducted from one's salary without having to render an account to the superior.

In an effort to grapple with the problem of maintaining control over the colonial clergy he advocated that ecclesiastical superiors should be chosen from members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit as soon as that would be possible and that these heads of missions remain subject to the Superior General and through him to Propaganda. This was to be the sticking point for Propaganda as it feared giving such authority to a French superior who was subject to the Archbishop of Paris for his appointment and who might be subservient to the French Government. Memories of Napoleon's attempts to usurp the authority of Propaganda in its

colonies were still too vivid for Rome to agree to this in spite of the abuses in the colonies over which Propaganda had no practical control. Fr. Leguay exercised his control when he saw to it that twenty priests who were judged to be unsuitable were sent home to France.⁵⁸

Sensing that he was not succeeding in winning the support of Propaganda in spite of a visit to Rome, he concentrated on improving the Seminary and increasing the membership of the Society through the introduction of the two years novitiate period. He went on tours looking for extra vocations; wanted to restart their own juniorate; increased the staff to nine members; intended once again participating in running seminaries for bishops who made such requests. Under the influence of Fr. Gaultier he introduced the Roman liturgy in ceremonial and in the breviary at home and on the missions. Finally in order to be less bound to the French religious and political world which had sprung so many unpleasant surprises on the Society, he sought to supply priests to the United States and planned to have Rome approve changes in their rule which would remove them from the control of the Archbishop of Paris.

Towards the end of December 1847 Fr. Leguay and his council drew up plans for the revision of the 1734 Rule to bring it into line with the changes which had taken place since then; namely that the declared purpose of the Society was no longer *pauperes clericos educare*, to educate poor scholars but *sodales educare*, namely to form members of its own Society; and since the Society was now occupied only with the missions it was no longer depending on the Archbishop of Paris but directly on Rome through the Congregation of Propaganda. To cope with the actual situation in which the Society found itself with regard to those who wanted to be associated with the Society without being full members, a two tier membership was to be provided with different obligations in the matter of use of property.

Fr. Leguay, recalling no doubt his own lack of success on an earlier mission to Rome, decided to send the more diplomatically skilled Fr. Loewenbruck to pilot the revised version of their Rule through the various stages of Roman procedures in such matters. The complexity of the process of approval amazed Fr. Loewenbruck as we can gather from his correspondence, but eventually on 23 February Propaganda gave its total approval to the changes.⁵⁹ One can imagine how pleased the Roman officials were to see the Congregation now subject directly to Propaganda rather than to the Archbishop of Paris in the matter of the appointment of the superior. That this change was bound to provoke strained relations between the Congregation and the Archbishop was not taken into consideration at the time. For the moment, Fr. Leguay should also have been very pleased with the success of Fr. Loewenbruck's mission to Rome were it not that by the time he arrived back in Paris after being delayed at Marseilles, all had utterly changed. Fr. Leguay was no longer superior and the congregation was once more facing the threat of suppression.

Revolution had broken out once more in France. King Louis Philippe was forced to abdicate and the Republic had been declared. Among those to benefit from the new situation were those in the French colonies who were still regarded as slaves by the law of the land. All slavery-laws were at last abolished. This was looked on as a personal victory for the new Director of the Colonies, Victor Schoelcher. But Fr. Leguay, now wrongly depicted as an anti-abolitionist, found himself under attack especially by the priests he had removed from office in the colonies. Realising that he had incurred the strong displeasure of Schoelcher, who was now threatening to destroy the society, Fr. Leguay felt he had no other option but to resign. Once again when the society seemed to be on the threshold of a new

era of consolidation and expansion, it was thrown into a state of crisis.⁶⁰ Just then there arrived on their doorstep one, Fr. Alexander Monnet, recently deported from Reunion. He was seen immediately as their saviour – sent by Providence. His saving act, however, was not what they had visualised at this stage.

FR. MONNET – PROVIDENTIAL LINKMAN (1848)

Fr. Alexander Monnet was ordained for the diocese of Cambrai in 1837. He wanted to go on the missions immediately but was released only in 1850 by his bishop, Mgr. Belmas. After a brief stay at the Holy Spirit Seminary he was posted to Reunion in the Indian ocean where his sterling work among the blacks earned him such titles as Father of the Blacks and Peter Claver. The French government was to honour him with the Legion of Honour. But all along he felt he should be a member of some religious order. When Fr. Frederick Le Vasseur, Fr. Libermann's assistant, arrived in the island in 1842 he became very friendly with Fr. Monnet but he felt he could not recommend him to Fr. Libermann for acceptance in their society of the Holy Heart of Mary. With the gift of hindsight we can judge that Le Vasseur was guided in this by Providence. Monnet had applied to Fr. Fourdinier for membership of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit but got impatient waiting till the promised re-organisation would make that possible. So when the Jesuits arrived on the island he applied to do his novitiate with them instead. In the meantime he was asked by the Prefect-Apostolic, Mgr. Poncelet, to accompany him to Rome. There he was advised by Pope Pius IX to return to Reunion as vice-Prefect Apostolic.⁶¹ While recuperating from the effects of his stint in Reunion he visited Cambrai and was asked by the new bishop, Mgr. Giraud, soon to be created cardinal, to address the students in the junior seminary. Among those influenced by his address were Jules Leman, future founder of the Irish province of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Augustine Planque, founder member of the Society of African Missions, and Armand Fava who was due to do his senior studies in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and as Prefect Apostolic in Reunion he was to found the Catholic Mission in East Africa, handing it over to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in 1862.⁶² Before returning to Reunion, on the advice of Fr. Le Vasseur, Monnet visited La Neuville to confer with Fr. Libermann. He then went on to rue des Postes in Paris and joined the Congregation of the Holy Spirit having availed of Fr. Leguay's reorganisation of the society allowing for candidates to do their novitiate in the place where they worked.⁶³

On returning to Reunion, Fr. Monnet was shocked to find himself accused of having influenced the Minister for the Colonies, M. Schoelcher, to declare the immediate end of slavery without any compensation being paid to the owners. There was no question of his being allowed to work on the island; the governor had him put aboard ship for France. Arriving back just before the Revolution broke he was feted as a hero by government officials.

His arrival at that moment in France was seen as providential by the directors of the Society of the Holy Spirit. Threatened as they were with possible extinction by Schoelcher, Fr. Monnet was the only man who could save them from that fate. He was approached to take on the post of superior vacated by Fr. Leguay, and though he was keen to return to Reunion as vice-Prefect Apostolic, now that the offending governor had been dismissed, he agreed to undertake the onerous task of the superiorship.

In accordance with the new Rule the approval of Propaganda had to be secured. Though Monnet's decision to accept the superiorship was not greeted with any



Francis Mary Paul Libermann
superior 1848-52



enthusiasm by the Papal Nuncio in Paris or by the Minister for the Colonies, his appointment was ratified.

Monnet soon found he was sitting in a very hot seat and realised that he was not cut out for such an administrative post. He found that Schoelcher was unbearably despotic when it came to arrangements in connection with clergy for the colonies, and discovered also that Propaganda was not agreeable to putting members of his society in charge of missions. When he found the Nuncio and the government agreeing against his advice to appoint two very unsuitable candidates in charge of the missions in Guadeloupe and Martinique, he turned to Fr. Libermann for advice. As a throw away statement he expressed a wish that their respective works could in some way be united. Fr. Libermann took up the hint, giving it his full approval. Fr. Monnet took the next train from Paris to Amiens to confer with Fr. Libermann at Notre Dame du Gard. One student who was surprised to see him there was Jules Leman, by then a seminarian. Fr. Libermann did not divulge the reason for Monnet's visit. He knew that secrecy was vital to the success of these delicate negotiations at this stage. Fr. Monnet, realising that such negotiations were not his forte, sent Fr. Loewenbruck to work out the details of a possible merger with Fr. Libermann. When matters were sufficiently clarified Fr. Libermann travelled to the Seminary at rue des Postes, timing his arrival to coincide with the vigil of their great feast of Pentecost which fell that year on the 10th June – one hundred and forty five years since Claude Francis Poullart des Places had launched the Society just a few hundred yards away in the church of Saint-Etienne des Grés in the presence of the Black Virgin of Paris.⁶⁴

A NEW DAWN

A document was signed agreeing in principle to the union of the two societies. The main points included in the document were that at a date and in a manner to be determined, Fr. Monnet would resign as superior in favour of Fr. Libermann; the practice of religious poverty would be re-introduced into the Rule; the two tier membership introduced by Fr. Leguay would be dropped, and the Rule of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary would be included as the Constitutions interpreting the Spiritan Rule approved by the Government and by the Holy See.

Next day Fr. Monnet wrote to his friend, Fr. Le Vasseur, in Mauritius:

My dear and worthy friend, it is done! Henceforth we will have but one heart and one soul, as we form now but one and the same Congregation. Our union and fusion took place yesterday. God willed to use me to be of service to the Seminary and Congregation of the Holy Spirit at a painful and critical moment.

There was little objection to this union on the part of the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, though the doughty Fr. Maturin Gaultier would be critical of the terms right up to the final agreement. Thereafter he was to be staunchly loyal to Fr. Libermann. That there was intense opposition to the union from Fr. Libermann's society will be better understood when we see the form of the union approved by the Holy See.⁶⁵

An immediate problem was that Fr. Monnet could not be expected to resign without incurring loss of face for him and for his society. He had also been appointed Vicar General by the Archbishop of Paris who was sensitive to the fact that he had ceased to have any say in his appointment as superior due to the change in the Rules of the society. Only a new appointment direct from Rome for

Fr. Monnet could get them over this problem. When it was learned that Rome was considering the appointment of a Vicar Apostolic for Madagascar, Fr. Libermann decided to put Fr. Monnet's name forward as he had already proved successful in nearby Reunion.

It was agreed that both Monnet and Libermann should go to Rome to be at hand to advise the Congregation of Propaganda as it was dealing with their proposals about the merger of their societies and related questions. The grave political unrest however made it inadvisable for them to absent themselves. In an effort to bring about peace at the barricades Archbishop Affre was mortally wounded 25 June. So once again Fr. Loewenbruck was sent to Rome with the necessary authorisation and instructions from both Fr. Libermann and Fr. Monnet.⁶⁶

Because of the disturbed situation in Rome as Revolution spread round Europe, Fr. Loewenbruck was pleasantly surprised that the Roman officials expedited his case, taking only a few days in contrast with the two months it took them to process the change in the Rule earlier in the year. They approved of the proposed merger of the two societies and promised to give serious consideration to the proposing of Fr. Monnet for the post of Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar.

After Loewenbruck's return a general meeting of the directors of both societies met in Paris 24 August and formalised their accord to the union, stipulating that the new name for the society would be The Congregation of The Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary, that the 1848 Rule be amended in the matter of requiring again the practice of evangelical poverty by all the members, and that the mention of a second order of members be omitted.⁶⁷

Fr. Monnet's name was accepted by Rome for appointment as Vicar Apostolic and his ordination as bishop took place in the seminary chapel in Paris 5 November in the absence of Fr. Libermann. The latter had gone to Rome to rectify the omission by Propaganda of the requirements in the Rule about the practice of religious poverty. In the meantime Rome had approved of his appointment as superior and approved also of the change of name for the society as requested. The terms of the official approval by Rome of the merger now in operation was that the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary had ceased to exist and that its members and associates were deemed to be members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly there were some teething problems, even some alarming rejection symptoms. How these were dealt with need not detain us here.⁶⁹ But for Fr. Libermann one of the most delicate problems posed by the union of the societies was to take his own men with him in accepting the situation which had emerged, namely the suppression of their own beloved society dedicated to the Holy Heart of Mary, which had been extolled so highly by Libermann as the most perfect model of the apostolate, and their absorption into the Congregation which they had come to look on not merely as the opposition but even as the cause of the abuses among the clergy with whom they had to work under in the colonies.

Fr. Libermann had gathered round him a band of devoted and mostly very young men who were inspired with the ideal of living a life of total sacrifice in the effort to bring the gospel of salvation to the category considered the most abandoned, namely the blacks who had been treated as slaves till recently. They were devoted to Fr. Libermann and proud of the highest standards which he had set before them as students in the extreme poverty of their communities at La Neuville and later at Notre Dame du Gard near Amiens. Though they knew they were poor and possessed of little influence even in the ecclesiastical world because of their recent origin, they may at the same time have seen themselves as an elite corps, ready and willing to take on the most abandoned and difficult

missions. Judging others by the standards they set for themselves they tended to be critical of much that they saw or heard about the more laid-back approach to the work of this demanding apostolate shown by some of the other clergy. The alleged low standards among some of the clergy was blamed on the Congregation of the Holy Spirit which was responsible for their being sent to the missions. Even Fr. Libermann had himself accepted such judgements, though he was later to pay high tribute to the work of the colonial clergy when he got to know more about the facts and was less inclined to believe the rumours.⁷⁰ The rumours that he had to try to deal with now were the garbled versions of the merger that had arrived in distant mission fields where communications were poor and where people easily felt abandoned. Many of his confreres were deeply pained and did not know what to believe when they were given to understand that their father and founder had sold them out, and that without being consulted they found themselves identified with those whom they disliked if not even despised.

Because of his preoccupations all summer, his trip to Rome and some serious troubles at the seminary where the students did not take well to their new director, Fr. Libermann had not been able to keep up his correspondence with his far flung confreres. At last, as Christmas approached, he took time off to write a special letter explaining his course of action and trying to put troubled minds at rest:

The union of our two societies has always appeared to me to be in accord with the designs and the will of God; they undertake the same work and are travelling along the same path. Now it is not according to the designs of Providence to raise up two societies to do one special work if one can do the work alone. That opinion was brusquely expressed to me in Rome in 1840 by men who were moved by zeal but were unaware of our real situation then.

"You wish to set up altar against altar", I was told, "The Society of the Holy Spirit is engaged in this work already; there is no need for you!". Although that observation was untrue at that time, nevertheless, Fr. Le Vasseur and I made several contacts with Fr. Fourdiner, superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. We offered to enter the society on condition that we be allowed to live in community and that we were not put in charge of parishes but allowed to work only with the blacks. The moment of God had not arrived at that time; we were too weak and we could not have been able to succeed with Fr. Fourdiner who could not be got to give way to our desire to live according to a rule. Now God's plans are ripe and all is now disposed for a successful outcome...⁷¹

When Libermann wrote that God's plans were now ripe he was referring in particular to the series of events since 1840. With the advantage of our knowledge of the story of the Society of the Holy Spirit from the beginning we catch glimpses of what seems like Providence at work much farther back. By a remarkable co-incidence both Claude Francis Poullart des Places and Francis Mary Paul Libermann had set out from almost the same spot in Rennes, though at an interval of one hundred and thirty years, leaving a life of security behind them and putting their trust only in God as they went in search of their vocation. Claude, instead of opting for the diocesan priesthood and entering the senior seminary conducted by the Eudists, had all unknown to himself at the time sown the seeds of his real vocation through his contact with Fr. Bellier's work in the training of poor students for the priesthood. In 1839 Libermann was to walk out from the material security of the Eudist novitiate in Rennes to throw in his lot with a group of students fired with zeal for the pastoral care of the black slaves being liberated at the time. Both Claude and Libermann had to agonise about what precisely the Lord wanted them to do

but once they were convinced of God's will no sacrifice could deter them. Both, convinced of God's loving care for the poor and abandoned, threw themselves wholeheartedly into the work of going to their aid. Now both these initiatives were being united by the dire needs of the black race.

But as we outline the providential events leading up to the union of the societies founded by des Places and Libermann it is not the identity of the work they were engaged in that is so striking as the identity of the spiritual outlook that inspired their undertaking this work in the first instance and which maintained its momentum later in spite of the daunting obstacles provided by upheavals at home and heartbreaking loss of life abroad.

The amazing identity between the spiritual intuitions which inspired des Places and Libermann was what really made the successful merger of their works possible. And here we feel we can detect the hand of Providence at work.

We have seen that the inspiration for Claude's work and its dedication as expressed in its official title came unmistakably from the spiritual movement started by Père Lallemand and developed by his disciples as part of their pastoral mission in Brittany. It is significant that while Libermann was with the Eudists in Rennes on being asked by a clerical student about the advisability of his studying Lallemand he gave his unconditional approval.⁷² He revealed thereby that he was conversant at the time with Lallemand's spirituality the core of which, as we have seen, was a total openness to the Holy Spirit of which Mary Immaculate was the perfect model.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary had not as yet been declared a dogma of the Christian faith but the theology underlying that mystery was being developed by spiritual masters like Saint John Eudes and Saint Grignon de Montfort. The title Spouse of the Spirit and the symbol of Our Lady's Immaculate Heart were being widely used to illustrate Our Lady's positive role in active co-operation with the Holy Spirit in her own sanctification and in her role as apostle of Jesus in the salvation of the world. This development in Marian theology and devotion had been given special prominence while Libermann was a student by the Archbishop of Paris and by the public sermons of the Irish-born Jesuit, Fr. Nicholas Tuite de McCarthy. This was the background of the founding of a branch of the Confraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary by a group of students in 1838 in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. In 1840 this branch was affiliated to the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners at the shine of Our Lady of Victories. The director at the time was the renowned Fr. Desgenettes. Fr. Desgenettes, who was in close contact both with the directors of the Seminary and with members of Fr. Libermann's society, soon foresaw that a union between the two societies was inevitable not merely because they were involved in the same pastoral work but because of the identity of their spiritual outlook.⁷³

Nothing illustrates better this convergence in the spiritual ethos of the two societies than the prayer for the conversion of sinners to be found in the manual of prayers in daily use in the Seminary for both staff and students:

O Holy and Adorable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, O God infinitely good and merciful, who wills not the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live, we offer to you, through the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary, our prayers, our almsgiving and our other good works, the acts of penance and mortification, the holy mass we shall offer or assist at today, to obtain the conversion of sinners, in particular those who have been recommended to us. O Mary Immaculate, permit us to unite our prayers and

sentiments with those of your Holy Heart, to adore the Holy Trinity, through the Divine Heart of Jesus your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.⁷⁴

When then some members of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary complained of their having abandoned their special heirloom, namely their intuition of the riches of the Apostolic heart of Mary as the model apostle, Fr. Libermann wrote to reassure them that nothing had been forfeited by their union with the Society of the Holy Spirit:

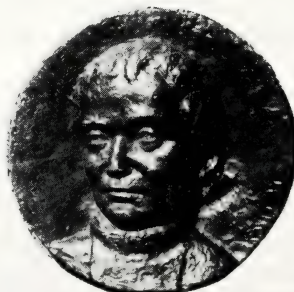
“My dear brother”, he writes to the Director of Aspirants, “you belong to the Holy Heart of Mary and you will always so belong. Our union with the Holy Spirit Community can’t do otherwise than increase our devotion and our love for that Heart which gave birth to our little Society. We have always placed our peace and our happiness in the Heart of Mary filled with the abundance of the Holy Spirit. If we did not express that plenitude of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Mary, it nevertheless constituted the essence of our devotion to the Most Holy Heart of Mary. We have not changed. It is merely a matter of our now expressing what before was understood, what we took for granted...”⁷⁵

Finally when Fr. Libermann got round to redrafting the Constitutions of the society in the light of the merger he stated their traditional spiritan spiritual inheritance as follows:

546 Art III Devotions of the Congregation.

The Congregation ... especially consecrates (its members) to the Holy Spirit, the author and accomplisher of all holiness and the inspirer of the apostolic spirit, and to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Mary is superabundantly filled by the Divine Spirit with the plenitude of holiness and of the apostolate and the most perfect participator in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, her Son, for the redemption of the world.

547 Art IV They will find in the Holy Spirit who lives in their souls a source of the interior and religious life and an all powerful principle of that perfect charity which is the soul of all apostolic virtue. They are to consider the Immaculate Heart of Mary as a perfect model of fidelity to all the holy inspirations of the Divine Spirit and of the interior practice of the virtues of religious and apostolic life. They will find in Her a refuge to which they can have recourse in their labours and their pains...⁷⁶



Plaques to
Des Places and Libermann
in the Spiritan Church, Rue l'Homond, Paris

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 - 2 Henri Le Floch, *Claude-François Poullart des Places* (1915 ed), hereinafter referred to as Le Floch, p537ff. Acte de mariage de Francois Claude etc., transcribed from the archives of diocese of Rennes, 1677, folio 3.
 - 3 Henry J. Koren, *The Spiritans*, (1958), p1; Le Floch, p538.
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 - 5 Paul Banéat, *Le Vieux Rennes*, p193ff.
- The Marbeufs ceded part of their property to the Discalced Carmelites who took up residence there in 1690 just as the des Places family were moving from that area to the town centre. Confiscated by the public authorities during the Revolution the Carmelite monastery was occupied 1823-1908 by the Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception. It was this community which was invited by Mr. G. Thiébault in 1863 to take charge of the 'Scotch College' at Rockwell. After a trial of one year they handed over this charge to the Holy Ghost Fathers.
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 - 8 Michel, p27, p250.
 - 9 Le Floch, p538.
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 - 26 J. B. Blain, *de Montfort*, p11.

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- 4 Michel, p17; *Spiritans Today* 4, p10.
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- 6 Le Floch, p33.
- 7 Michel, p17.
- 8 Koren. *Sp.W.*, p231.
- 9 Charles Besnard, *Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Documents et Recherches IV, Centre International Montfortain, Roma, p. VII f.
- 10 Besnard, *de Montfort*, IV, p274f; Koren. *Sp.W.*, p279.
- 11 Michael, p15, p144.
- 12 Blain, *de Montfort*, p10f.
- 13 Michel, Poullart des Places et L'Aa, (Ms) pp 10ff.
- 14 Le Floch, p39f.
- 15 Michel, p42.
- 16 Koren, *Sp.W.*, p231.
- 17 Michel, p30.
- 18 Michel, p31.
- 19 Durtelle de St.-Sauveur, *Le Collège de Rennes*, pp161ff, as quoted by Michel.
- 20 Koren, *Sp.W.*, p233
- 21 Koren, *Sp.W.*, p233.
- 22 Michel, p31f.
- 23 Koren, *Sp.W.* p233f.
- 24 Baily, A., *Descartes*, p32, as quoted by Le Floch, p50.
- 25 Koren, *Sp.W.*, p235.
- 26 Michel, p159f. The only part of the Jesuit college to survive the bombing is the Church (Notre Dame de la Gloriette) though it is no longer used for religious worship.
- 27 Michel, p34f.
- 28 Koren, *Sp.W.*, p235.

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- 6 Louis Chatellier, *L'Europe des Dévots*, Flammarion, 1987, p 320.
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- 14 *Spiritus*, suppl. 1963 p.11; Michel, p 194; *Spiritan Papers* 7, p16
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- 16 Michel, p 175f.
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- 18 Le Floch, p305. An early entry in the *Spiritan* archives giving Claude's date for promotion to minor orders erroneously puts him as belonging to the diocese of Rouen (Rothomagensis); this lead Père Le Floch to conclude that for some unknown reason the dimissorial letters had been issued by the bishop of Rouen, who actually happened to be in Paris on other business at that time; but a search by Père Michel has put it beyond doubt that the letters were issued as required by canon law from Rennes.
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- 23 Daly, J., p.51, no 61; Le Floch, p.598.
- 24 *Sp.P.* 22, p.53.
- 25 *Pratique de Vertus* (manual) p.95 as quoted by Michel, op.cit., p.67.
- 26 Biographies, 2, p. 259; Farragher, Leman, p. 34f.
- 27 Michel p292
- 28 De Lattre, *Les Etablissements des Jesuits*, Nantes.
- 29 Thomas p171
- 30 Clorivière, p314; re Spiritan approach to

poverty and obedience cf. Koren, *Spiritan Charism*, pp.9-13., 18-34, 48ff.

- 31 Michel p207
- 32 *Pratique de Vertus*, p.17-20, 126-8 as quoted by Michel, op.cit., p.58ff.
- 33 Michel p242-3
- 34 Michel p243-4
- 35 Koren p275
- 36 *Spiritan Papers* No 7, p8.
- 37 Michel p311-2
- 38 Michel p308-9
- 39 Michel p312
- 40 Besnard, *de Montfort, Documents IV*, pp283/3; Koren pp287-89.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

- 1 Besnard, *Documents IV*, p279
- 2 Boyle, p144ff.
- 3 *Spiritan Papers* No 16, p47.
- 4 *Spiritus*, 6, pp48ff
- 5 Battersby, W. J., *De La Salle*, pp107ff, 171ff.
- 6 Blain, *De La Salle*, p88; Battersby, pp109ff.
- 7 *Spiritus, supplément* 1963, p21.
- 8 Blain, J. B., *De La Salle*, p88.
- 9 *Spiritus Supplément* 1963, p7, note 12 bis.
- 10 Michel, pp223ff; Besnard, V., pp81ff; Battersby, pp110f.
- 11 *Spiritus* 13, p387f.
- 12 Besnard, IV, pp273ff.
- 13 Besnard, IV, p279ff.
- 14 Koren, p284/5.
- 15 Besnard, IV, pp279ff.
- 16 *Bulletin d'Histoire Montfortaine*, March 1974: Hypothèse d'un voyage ignore...
- 17 Michel, pp233p
- 18 Battersby, pp205ff.
- 19 Michel, p238ff.
- 20 *Spiritan Papers* 16, p42.
- 21 *Spiritan Papers* 16, p63.
- 22 Besnard, IV, pp281f; Koren, p287.
- 23 Boyle, pp45ff.
- 24 Michel, pp249f.
- 25 Michel, p250
- 26 Banéat, p627.
- 27 Le Floch, pp542ff; cf Le Chat Family tree, *ibid.*, p544ff.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

- 1 *Spiritan Papers* No 7, pp3ff; *Notices Biographiques*, (NB) No 1, p20ff; Rath, *Geschichte der Congregation*, Vol 1, pp156ff.
- 2 Besnard, *Documents IV*, p305.
- 3 Besnard, p314.
- 4 Besnard, p313.
- 5 Besnard, p316.
- 6 Besnard, p328.
- 7 Michel, pp275ff.
- 8 Besnard, *Documents IV*, p317; Michel, pp270ff.
- 9 Michel, p285.

- 10 Michel, p276, note 3, and Fr. Caris' letter to Cardinal de Fleury.
- 11 Information courtesy of Père Michel from Status, S.J.
- 12 B.G. 36, pp468ff; Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, p23ff; Rath, 1, pp156ff.
- 13 Légrain, p45; B.G. No 520, p478.
- 14 B.G. 36, pp473ff.
- 15 Le Floch, p379.
- 16 Letter copied by Père Michel.
- 17 Cf B.G. 36, p494ff.
- 18 Daly, *Spiritan Wellsprings*, p43
- 19 Le Floch, p598.
- 20 Daly, p 45.
- 21 Le Floch, p 598f.
- 22 cf Gobeil *Spiritan Life* No. 2, 1990, pp.13ff; also *Spiritan Papers*, No 7, p17f.
- 23 Le Floch, p.599f.
- 24 Daly, p 45.
- 25 cf *Spiritan Papers*, No 7, p3ff; Koren, *Spiritan Charism*, p.48ff.
- 26 Besnard, *de Montfort* IV, p282f; Koren pp287-9.
- 27 Besnard, p.278f; Koren, p.283.
- 28 Michel, p257.
- 29 Koren, *Knaves or Knights*, pp. 12ff, 127ff.
- 30 *Spiritan Papers*, 7, p18ff; Koren, *Knaves or Knights*, pp.10ff.
- 31 Koren, *Knaves or Knights*, pp. 100ff.
- 32 Koren, *Knaves or Knights*, pp. 18ff, 144ff
- 33 Boyle, pp40-41.
- 34 Michel, p319.
- 35 One wonders if this offer of the direction of the seminary in Corsica came at the suggestion of the conqueror and governor of the island, Lieutenant General, Count de Marbeuf, a descendant of the illustrious family in Rennes which had such close ties with the des Places family. It was due, incidentally, to the good offices of Count de Marbeuf and his nephew, the bishop of Autun, that the Corsicans, Napoleon Bonaparte and his brothers, received their education free in junior seminaries and military academies on mainland France.
- 36 *Biographies*, 2, p. 259.
- 37 Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, p119f.
- 38 *Spiritan Life*, No. 1 (Dec 1989) pp9ff; *Biographies*, 2, p. 254,259; for Fr. McDermott cf. Liam Swords, *The Green Cockade*, Glendale, 1989, pp. 140-1 et passim.
- 39 Janin, II, p252f; Koren, p124.
- 40 *ND*, 1917, pp28ff.
- 41 *ND*. p35; Coulon, p.690.
- 42 *NB*. 2, p 253, 269ff; Koren, *A Spiritan Who was Who*, No. 26.
- 43 *NB*. 2, pp269ff; Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, pp126ff.
- 44 *ND*. 1917, pp37ff; *NB*. 2. pp271ff; Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, p128.
- 45 *ND*. p39.
- 46 Coulon, p692; *Spiritan Papers* 22, p568.
- 47 Koren, pp131ff; *NB*. 2, pp278ff; Koren, *Knaves or Knights*, p.143.
- 48 *NB*. 2, pp280ff; Koren, pp132ff.
- 49 Coulon, pp749ff.
- 50 Koren, p138.
- 51 Coulon-Rath, pp547ff.
- 52 Koren, p138ff.
- 53 *NB*. 2, pp295ff.
- 54 Koren, pp140ff, 166ff; Coulon, pp289ff.
- 55 *NB*. 2, pp290ff.
- 56 *Spiritan Papers* 7, p22; *NB*. 2, pp304ff.
- 57 Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, p142f.
- 58 Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, pp143ff.
- 59 *NB*. 2, pp323ff; *ND*. 1917, p47f.
- 60 *NB*. 2, pp309ff; Koren, pp149ff.
- 61 *NB*. 2, pp331ff.
- 62 Farragher S., *Leman*, p12f.
- 63 *NB* 2, p337.
- 64 Coulon, pp695ff; Koren, pp200ff.
- 65 Koren, pp200ff.
- 66 *ND*. 1917, pp47ff.
- 67 *ND*., pp53ff.
- 68 *ND*., pp46ff; Coulon, pp695ff; Koren, pp200ff; Farragher, pp28ff.
- 69 Cf Koren, pp206ff.
- 70 Koren, *Ends of the Earth*, pp154 ff.
- 71 *ND* X, p339f.
- 72 *Lettres* Sp. II, p.49; *Spiritus* 4, p334.
- 73 *Spiritan Papers* 22, p70.
- 74 *Preces Diurnae*, p. 8; for a similar but more diffuse prayer, cf the Manual of the Archconfraternity of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary (Our Lady of Victories), 5th ed., p. 364f.
- 75 *ND*. XII, p133; For further development of this theme cf. Koren, *Spiritan Charism*, Bethel Park, PA, 1990, pp.25f.
- 76 *ND*. 10, 546; Daly, J., *Spiritan Wellsprings*, pp156-7.

Main Sources

Very few personal papers concerning des Places survive in the General Archives of the society he founded. The great fire which devastated Rennes in 1720 wiped out the des Places family home and papers. The French Revolution suppressed his society, confiscated the seminary premises, and removed its records. Luckily the original manuscript of des Places' retreat notes have survived as well as his autograph copy of the rule he composed for his seminary. Most of the documentation about his life and work has come as a result of painstaking research into other archives, civil and ecclesiastical.

The principal sources used in this work are as follows:

The Writings of des Places: These were published in full both in French and English by Fr. Henry Koren in his book *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places*, 1959, Duquesne, 297 pp. Included also in this volume are the two earliest attempts at biographies of des Places: A memoir by Fr. Pierre Thomas, CSSp. (1687-1751) who was a student under des Places 1704-09 and was later a director of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, and a more brief account of des Places to be found in the life of St. Grignon de Montfort by Fr. Charles Besnard, CM., a former student of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. Thomas' memoir, in the version which has survived, is incomplete: 24 pages in quarto, ending its account at 1702. Besnard's account, written in 1767, has some valuable information not to be found in Thomas' Ms; it appears in Vol. V of his work which remained unpublished until recent years. cf. Centre International Montfortain, Vol. IV, of *Documents et Recherches*, Roma, 1981, pp 274-88.

Fr. Joseph Picot de Clorivière in his life of Grignon de Montfort also devotes some space to des Places and though he follows Besnard closely he used independent sources. cf. *La Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Missionnaire Apostolique*, etc., Paris, 1785, pp 312-19.

The first major study of des Places was the biography published in 1906 and re-edited 1915 by Père Henri Le Floch, CSSp, rector of the French Seminary in Rome: *Une Vocation et Une Fondation au Siecle de Louis XIV – Claude-François Poullart des Places, Fondateur du Seminaire et de la Congrégation de Saint-Esprit 1679-1709*, Rome et Paris, 1915, 683 pp. The appendix to this work contains 147 pages of transcripts of relevant historical documents.

Bulletin Général de la Congrégation de Saint-Esprit Vol. 36 pp 468ff gives transcripts of the relevant documents dealing with the Civil recognition of des Places' Seminary and Society of the Holy Spirit 1726-34, and the ecclesiastical approval of the Rule for this Society presented in 1734.

In 1962 appeared what has been accepted as the standard study of des Places and his times by Père Joseph Michel entitled *Claude-François Poullart des Places fondateur de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*, Paris, 1962, 350 pp. This scholarly work has stood the test of time but minor additions to the des Places story have been added by Père Michel in his contributions to other publications as mentioned in the text. His most recent work on des Places and the Assemblée des Amis in particular gives vital clues as to the sources of des Places' inspiration. Joseph Michel, *L'Influence de L'AA – Association secrete de pieté – sur Claude François Poullart des Places*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1992.

Various issues of *Spiritan Papers* have dealt with aspects of des Places' work and charism: Nos. 3,4,5,7,8,10,16 and 22. No. 16 is devoted to a re-issue of portion of des Places' writings newly translated.

Le Vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste De La Salle, Instituteur des Frères des Ecoles

Chretiennes, Rouen, 1755, by Canon John Baptist Blain refers briefly to a joint project involving des Places and De La Salle; cf. translation by Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC., Vol. 2, Book 3, pp 84ff.

For information on Rennes in the time of des Places the main source used is *Le Vieux Rennes* by Paul Ban at, Rennes, 1911, and for the Collège Louis le Grand *La vie quotidienne d'un collège Parisien pendant plus de trois cinquante ans-Collège Louis Le Grand 1563-1920* by Gustave Dupont-Ferrier, Paris 1921, Tome I.

Other sources as given in the references.



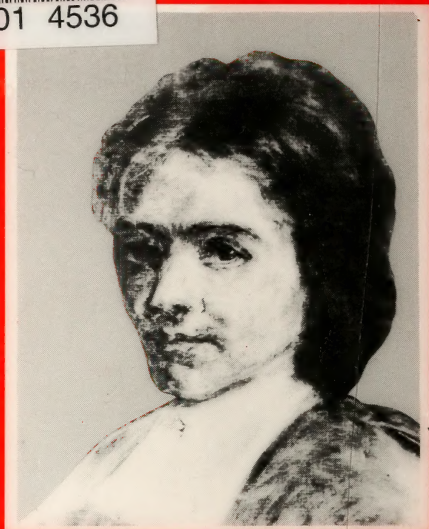
From an ancient leaflet containing the prayer 'per sanctam', beloved of Claude and recited thrice daily in the seminary. cf. p. 203



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LED BY THE SPIRIT

THE LIFE AND WORK OF
CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES



This is the story of an imaginative project started by a French student in the era of Louis XIV. Renouncing a title to noble status and an immense family fortune, Claude Poullart des Places joined with a group of poor students who wanted to be priests. Though but a student himself he formed a special seminary and under his direction they trained for service only in areas of greatest need. Known as the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, this work flourished steadily. Then it suffered a near mortal blow in the premature death of its charismatic founder. The students, however, succeeded in maintaining his project, orienting it towards the missions. The chequered story of des Places' brave enterprise is told here with a rare note of suspense until, finally we see a convert Jew, Fr. Libermann, transform the Society into a dynamic force poised for the evangelisation of Africa. Though written primarily for the Spiritan family, this story makes rewarding reading for others as well.

The author

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